Remember the Past – Could It Happen Again?

By Dr. Richard Kelley

In just three days, on Tuesday, September 11, the people of our nation and many others around the world will pause to remember, honor and pray for the souls of the nearly 3,000 innocent people who lost their lives exactly 11 years before when al-Qaida terrorists hijacked four commercial aircraft and turned them into flying bombs. As we join in prayer for the 9/11 victims, I hope many of us will also consider the following. During the past decade plus one year, the world has become very unstable in many ways, and planned reductions in the budget and size of the U.S. armed forces may make our nation vulnerable to new, major attacks.

In the Saturday Briefing article I wrote just a year ago (http://tinyurl.com/SB091011), I described my personal experiences with the 9/11 tragedy as well the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. Many historians feel that both attacks were conceived by enemies who were convinced that our country had become weak, distracted and politically divided, which left openings for crippling blows directed at military and economic centers.

Are we approaching that point again? Consider the following:

Since a peak during the Vietnam War over 40 years ago, national defense spending, as a percentage of our gross domestic product (GDP – the total value of all the goods produced and services delivered in our country in a year, in both the public and private sectors), gradually fell from 9.5 percent to about 3 percent in 2001, when those hijacked aircraft slammed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

That awakened our nation to the dangers of the new world in which we live, and with national defense spending bouncing back to about 4.8 percent of GDP in 2010, there have been no successful repeat attacks.

Today, in 2012, we seem to be going back to a Rip Van Winkle sleep and, based on President Obama’s budget proposals, national defense spending is headed toward a projected historic low of 2.5 percent of GDP a decade from now!

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In terms of inflation-adjusted dollars, spending on national defense will be essentially flat at around $0.6 to $0.7 trillion while spending on entitlements soars — nearly doubles — from $1.5 trillion to almost $3 trillion by 2022. If current trends continue, by 2018, the U.S. will be spending more on interest on the national debt than on protecting our nation’s security in this dangerous, volatile world.

It is worth noting that the President’s budget has not gotten a single vote in either the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives. That, however, does not mean that the threat to our nation’s ability to defend itself has gone away. It hasn’t. That is because under the Budget Control Act of 2011, signed by President Obama on August 2, 2011, the entire federal budget is headed for $1.2 trillion in automatic spending cuts (“sequestration”) over the next 10 years. And those cuts hit defense spending hardest, with $492 billion or 42.6 percent of the total. Yet the cuts scarcely touch entitlement spending, the biggest part of the budget.

Unless Congress and the President – whichever candidate is elected on November 6 – fix these poorly conceived priorities, defense spending will fall to levels that will make it difficult for the U.S. military to properly defend our nation. Congress and the President could address this threat right now, although with elections looming in about eight weeks, this is unlikely.

Spending cuts in national defense will not only make our country more vulnerable and a more tempting target for those who wish us ill, it will also result in further job losses in many, many areas of government and the private sector. With defense spending being a significant component of the economy of Hawai’i and Hawai’i’s visitor industry, our state will be hit harder than most.

So, this week, as we remember those who lost their lives at Pearl Harbor, the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, think about the future. Are we headed in the right direction? Or, could it happen again?