

How much is enough?

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

In the third quarter of 2007, the nation's gross domestic product - the market value of the nation's output of goods and services - reached \$13.97 trillion. How much of that should be spent on national defense?

In response to a call in early December from Adm. Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Sen. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C., and Rep. Trent Franks, R-Ariz., have introduced a bill that would set a "floor" under the annual defense budget of no less than 4 percent of GDP. For the coming budget year, that would be \$558 billion.

The current year's base defense budget, signed by President George W. Bush in mid-November, is \$459.3 billion, roughly 3.3 percent of GDP. That doesn't include \$6.3 billion spent on nuclear weapons by the Department of Energy or the roughly \$144 billion a year being spent off-budget on the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The percentage of the GDP spent on the base military budget has decreased since the end of the Cold War, reaching 3 percent in the last three years of the Clinton administration, rising to 3.9 percent under President Bush in 2005. Early next month, Bush will send Congress his 2009 defense budget. Early indications are that Admiral Mullen won't get his 4 percent wish, but that doesn't mean that a compliant Congress won't add money to it. There's hardly anything Congress likes more than spending money in an election year, particularly on job-intensive contracts.

This is all the more true because none of the major presidential candidates, regardless of party, is making defense spending an issue. They all are on record supporting the addition of more combat troops to the active-duty Army and Marine Corps. That's part of what has the Pentagon planners worried.

Every additional soldier or Marine costs roughly \$100,000 a year to pay and maintain. That includes food, clothing, shelter and family benefits, but not combat-related equipment or training. The Pentagon wants to add 65,000 new soldiers and 27,000 more Marines by 2012. That's \$9.2 billion in extra personnel costs alone, before you even start to equip and train them. Military health care costs alone are expected to reach \$50 billion by 2010.

The Pentagon also must "reset" forces and equipment ground down by five years of war. Maintenance depots here and overseas are full of tanks, trucks, aircraft and other equipment that must be rebuilt or replaced.

And that's all before you get to stuff that makes the admirals, generals and contractors and many members of Congress salivate: new weapons systems. The Air Force, for example, is now sounding alarms

about early models of its longtime workhorse, the F-15 Eagle fighters. In November, a Missouri Air National Guard F-15C broke in half on a training mission. The pilot suffered a broken arm, a dislocated shoulder and other injuries when he ejected from the plane. An investigation found a structural flaw common to about 40 percent of the Air Force's fleet of 700 Eagles.

In some ways, it was a happy accident for Air Force procurement officers, who have been arguing for years that the F-15s should be phased out and replaced by F-22 Raptors. But at \$137 million a copy, replacing even 20 F-15s a year with F-22s would cost \$2.7 billion.

The Air Force wish list also includes new tankers and cargo planes. The Army says it will need \$12 billion to \$13 billion a year to replace its worn-out equipment. The Navy wants \$22 billion a year to boost its fleet to 313 ships from the current 280.

Back in October, when the Air Force approached the House Armed Services Committee with its wish list, Chairman Ike Skelton, D-Mo., said, "Everything of which you speak, whether it's people or planes or equipment, is budget-driven. I heard no word about strategic thought of where the Air Force fits into the defense and security of our nation."

An excellent point. Four percent may sound cheap, but another way to look at the military budget is that it accounts for nearly half of every dollar the government spends outside of Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and other entitlement programs. Before requiring that at least 4 percent of GDP be devoted to the Pentagon budget, the nation's leaders - and especially those who seek its presidency - should focus on our real strategic needs. Weapons - and wars - that don't serve those needs should be abandoned.

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