

Too much for defense, or not enough?

by Robert_J_Caldwell

To those expressing surprise if not horror that the Bush administration is proposing to increase defense spending in wartime (imagine that!), herewith a bit of perspective. The baseline 2008 Department of Defense budget of \$481.4 billion plus an added \$141.7 billion for combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan still leave military spending as a share of the national economy below even peacetime rates for most of the last half century.

That's right, below the post-Korean War levels of the 1950s, below the pre-Vietnam defense spending rates in the early 1960s, below the post-Vietnam defense shares of the 1970s and below the noncombat rates of the 1980s. The baseline DOD budget, even with President Bush's proposed 11.3 percent increase for next year, is heading down over the next three years to the holiday-from-history rates of the Clinton-era 1990s.

The true measure of U.S. defense spending, of course, isn't the nominal numbers but the proportional share of the national economy devoted to defending the nation.

By this gauge, the United States is prosecuting a global war on terror complete with hot wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while devoting less of the nation's economy to defense - 4.3 percent in 2008 - than, say, Jimmy Carter did in 1978 - 4.7 percent. That's the remarkable fact lost on those like House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other liberals professing sticker shock at the new defense budget numbers.

What did they expect?

War is expensive. The Iraq war doesn't rank with Korea or Vietnam in size or casualties but it's costing over \$100 billion a year to fight. Everyone, including Democrats, agrees that the Army and Marine Corps are too small. Expanding the all-volunteer military can't be done on the cheap. The new high-tech weapons systems, including ships and aircraft, now being built are essential to maintaining America's technological edge and strategic reach over any conceivable adversary for decades into the future. They, too, are inescapably expensive.

That all this can still be done by spending a smaller share of the national economy on defense than in any post-World War II peacetime era save the disarming Clinton years doesn't suggest Pentagon profligacy.

Admittedly, the Bush budget for 2008 is courting a fight with congressional Democrats by proposing to spend 11.3 percent more on defense while domestic spending is all but frozen at a mere 1 percent increase overall. Inevitably, we'll be hearing screams of protest that a heartless Bush budget is throwing widows and orphans out in the cold.

Here too, however, a bit of perspective is in order.

Until 2006, Bush's brand of compassionate, big-government conservatism rivaled Lyndon Johnson's Great Society spending spree of the 1960s. Lest liberals forget, federal spending increased 33 percent from 2001 to 2006. Discretionary spending (excluding Social Security, Medicare and other entitlements) rose by 49 percent over those same five years.

Increases for specific domestic spending categories were positively eye-popping: Medicare, 58 percent; education, 137 percent; veterans' benefits, 56 percent; health research and regulation, 78 percent; highways and mass transit, 28 percent; natural resources and the environment, 28 percent; community and regional development, 342 percent; training, employment and social services, 19 percent; housing and commerce, 58 percent; general government, 34 percent; and energy, an average annual increase of 211 percent.

This runaway spending is now being reined in to shrink the outsized federal budget deficits that resulted. Fiscal restraint and the gushers of new federal revenues produced by Bush's pro-growth tax cuts have cut the deficit by 58 percent in three years. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office forecasts a deficit at or below 1 percent of GDP, less than half the average annual rate for the last 40 years, for the remainder of the Bush presidency.

Meanwhile, even Bush bashers might agree that national defense - including full funding for our troops in combat, protecting the homeland and essential military modernization - must remain Washington's top priority.

The new Democratic Congress might reflect, as well, on the defense deficits that must be made good.

The dispatch of five additional Army brigades to Iraq effectively consumes the U.S. military's ground-force strategic reserve. The official defense posture requirement, written into law by congress, mandates military forces capable of fighting and winning "two nearly simultaneous regional conflicts." That supposed capability is now unambiguously a fiction. Any new crisis elsewhere in the world would find the Pentagon's cupboard all but bare of combat-ready ground forces.

The bill for the military procurement holiday of the 1990s is past due. The average age of Air Force refueling tanker aircraft is 45 years. The F-16 and F-15 Air Force fighters are based on designs 30 years old. The Navy's fleet of combatant ships has shrunk from nearly 600 in 1989 to fewer than 290 today. The current shipbuilding rate of about seven new ships per year is barely adequate to keep the fleet from shrinking further, and insufficient to achieve the Navy's goal of a 313-ship fleet by 2020. The first comprehensive Army

modernization program in a generation is only now being partially funded.

Given all this and the uncertain prospects in Iraq, the right question is not whether the defense budget is too big but whether it's big enough.

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