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Trump's Fake Populism on Military Spending

By Miriam Pemberton
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There's a lot of misdirection going on these days. Anybody whose head hasn't been spinning over the last couple of weeks has probably been in a nice news blackout somewhere.

We'll all need some strategies if we're going to stay sane. One is making sure that in the midst of the controversy of the day, we keep track of the big picture. Here's one attempt along those lines.

Donald Trump has been taking credit for cutting \$600 million from the contract for the biggest Pentagon buy in history: the F-35 "Joint Strike Fighter" plane.

There will be all sorts of maneuvering to stop those cuts. But if they actually happen, they'll shave some money off an outrageously expensive plane that's drawn the ire of budget hawks for years.

Unfortunately for Trump, a few reporters have debunked his claim to credit for the price cut, pointing out that the contractor and the government had already agreed to it before Trump ever talked to them.

But let's stand back to get a better view, since this is a bigger problem than just another Trump lie.

For starters, we shouldn't be buying *any* F-35s. It's a terrible plane.

It's been in development for more than 20 years. New flaws have been discovered all along the way — the latest round of tests alone found 276 different faults. And it weighs too much, so the fix for this has involved — wait for it — removing fire protections for the pilots (who are flying a plane that's definitely prone to fire.)

Attempting to fix all these problems has sent the price ever higher. The total program estimate is now \$1.5 *trillion*, making it the most expensive weapon system in U.S. history.

The stop-the-F-35 crowd is bipartisan. John McCain, who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee, called the F-35's record on cost, schedule, and performance “a scandal and a tragedy.” And a writer for the conservative *National Review* flatly declared that the program couldn't be fixed and needed to be canceled. He's right.

Trump wants to impress us with his tough talk about hard bargaining with the crony capitalist Pentagon contractors. But we shouldn't be impressed. Trump's plans for boosting the defense budget will be the biggest boon those folks have had in years.

For the record, we already give the Pentagon more money to spread around than it's had since World War II. More than the next seven or eight countries put together, depending on whose numbers you use.

Increases to the Pentagon budget have been kept modest in recent years because of 10-year spending caps Congress set a few years ago on Pentagon spending and on things like transportation, education, and clean air and water — the works, basically.

The new administration wants to get rid of these caps, *but only for the Pentagon*. No more ceiling on military spending, they say — the sky's the limit.

With this display of “hard bargaining,” Trump's laying claim to defending taxpayers and workers. Don't buy it. Economists at the University of Massachusetts have repeatedly shown that a billion dollars given to the Pentagon creates fewer jobs than the same amount invested in education, health care, or transportation.

Taxpayers and workers, in other words, would get more bang for their buck making things we actually need, instead of building ever fancier ways to kill people.

This is phony populism, and we can't let him get away with it.