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Budget Goes Military

By Dave Lindorff

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Economist Dean Baker, in an article published at NationofChange, complains that the *New York Times* never explains the federal budget in a way that Americans can comprehend, because it publishes big numbers, like the billions of dollars spent on welfare or on foreign aid, but never notes that neither of those “big” numbers amounts to even 1% of the federal budget. His critique is correct as far as it goes, but like all too many liberal analysts, Baker studiously fails to note a

few *really BIG* numbers in the budget that also don't get mentioned by the *Times* and the rest of the corporate media, either as a number or as a percentage.

This is a big failing of the liberal left: not calling out the Hannibal's war elephant in the room.

Military spending, even when it does get reported, is often only referred to in terms of the increase being proposed, without the total ever being provided. It is reported (in the *Times*!) wrong in so many ways. For example, while the actual budget outlay is sometimes mentioned, the amount of the interest on the debt that is for prior military spending that was financed through borrowing is not included. Nor is the spending on veterans' health care, which is surely part of military spending. Nor is the share of the Energy Dept. budget that is for nuclear weapons included. According to the National Priorities Project, the 2015 budget for the military was \$598 billion, which represented 54% of all federal discretionary spending. That number didn't include \$65 billion in veterans spending and \$26 billion for nuclear weapons, bringing the total to about \$690 billion, or 63% of all discretionary spending. 2015 total discretionary spending was \$1.1 trillion, including nuke spending and veterans spending, spending on the military represented 63% of the total.

Discretionary spending is spending that Congress can cut, and that is funded through borrowing or through income tax and other federal tax collections. Other spending, called mandatory or non-discretionary, is primarily for Medicare and Social Security, is non-discretionary, as it is mandated and has been funded through separate tax collections — the FICA tax and the Medicare tax. Also non-discretionary is payments of principal and interest on the national debt. Interest alone was \$400 billion, about half of that being for interest — and half of that interest was on borrowing to fund wars and the military.

One of the tricks of the trade, often used by the *Times*, is to lump non-discretionary spending together with discretionary spending and then to describe military spending as a percentage of the whole, which is grossly misleading. That equation: \$3.36 billion was the figure for total federal outlays in 2015. So by that reckoning, the military spending looks like a more reasonable 39% of the total. That could be made a bit more honest by adding the \$200 billion in war-related interest payments to the military outlays, which would make it 45% spent on the military, but the *Times* does none of that, and doesn't include Veterans or energy department outlays. The paper typically counts just current Pentagon budgeting which is that \$598 billion figure for 2015, and then gives that as a percentage of the total discretionary and mandatory budget of \$3.8 trillion, making it look like the military share of that budget was just 16%.

No wonder Americans aren't freaking out about how much of their tax dollar goes to the military. They think it's 16 cents of each dollar, when it's really the percentage of the discretionary budget, which is that 63 cents on the dollar.

Want to know why Americans pay more in taxes than people in the Nordic countries or Europe, with all their fine infrastructure, good schools, national health care systems and one month or even 6-8 weeks of paid vacations? It's because they pay maybe 5-6% of their taxes for their military forces, and we pay 63% for ours.

As tax day rapidly approaches, remember this figure and tell your friends and neighbors about it, and remind them that President Trump is calling for giving the Pentagon another \$54 billion in this year's budget.