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A \$350 Billion Defense Department Would Keep Us Safer Than a \$700 Billion War Machine

The U.S. Congress has begun debate on the FY2020 military budget. The [FY2019 budget](#) for the US Department of Defense is \$695 billion dollars. President Trump's [budget request](#) for FY 2020 would increase it to \$718 billion.

Spending by other federal Departments adds [over \\$200 billion](#) to the total "national security" budget (\$93 billion to Veterans' Affairs; \$16.5 billion to the Department of Energy for nuclear weapons; \$43 billion to the State Department; and \$52 billion to the Dept. of Homeland Security).

These sums don't include the interest on US debts incurred to fund past wars and military buildups, which boost the real cost of the US Military-Industrial Complex to well over a trillion dollars per year.

Depending which of these sums one counts as military spending, they already eat up between 53% and 66% of federal discretionary spending (interest payments are not part of this calculation because they are not discretionary), leaving only a third of discretionary spending for everything else.

At the April 4th NATO summit in Washington, the US pressed its NATO allies to increase their military spending to 2% of GDP. But a [July 2018 article](#) by Jeff Stein in the *Washington Post* flipped that on its head and examined how the US could fund many of our unmet social needs by instead *reducing our own* military spending to 2% of GDP from its current 3.5%-4%. Stein calculated that that would release \$300 billion per year for other national priorities, and he explored some of the ways those funds could be used, from balancing the federal budget to eliminating child poverty and homelessness.

Perhaps to create an illusion of balance, Jeff Stein quoted Brian Riedl of the Manhattan Institute, who tried to pour cold water on his idea. "It's not just a matter of buying fewer bombs," Riedl told him. "The United States spends \$100,000 per troop on compensation – such as salaries, housing (and) healthcare."

But Riedl was being disingenuous. [Only one eighth](#) of the post-Cold War increase in US military spending is for pay and benefits for US troops. Since US military spending bottomed out in 1998 after the end of the Cold war, inflation-adjusted "Personnel" costs have only risen by about 30%, or \$39 billion per year. But the Pentagon is spending \$144.5 billion on "Procurement" of new warships, warplanes and other weapons and equipment. That is more than double what it spent in 1998, an increase of 124% or \$80 billion per year. As for housing, the Pentagon has slashed funds for military family housing by over 70%, just to save \$4 billion per year.

The largest category of military spending is "Operation and Maintenance," which now accounts for \$284 billion per year, or 41% of the Pentagon budget. That's \$123 billion (76%) more than in 1998. "RDT&E" (research, development, testing & evaluation) accounts for another \$92 billion, a 72% or \$39 billion increase over 1998. (All these figures are inflation-adjusted, using the Pentagon's own "constant dollar" amounts from the FY2019 DOD [Green Book](#).) So net increases in personnel costs, including family housing, account for only \$35 billion, one eighth of the \$278 billion per year rise in military spending since 1998.

A major factor in rising costs at the Pentagon, especially in the most expensive "Operation and Maintenance" portion of the budget, has been the policy of contracting out functions traditionally performed by military personnel to for-profit corporate "contractors." This outsourcing drive has been an unprecedented gravy train for hundreds of for-profit corporations.

A [2018 study](#) by the Congressional Research Service found that an incredible \$380 billion of the \$605 billion FY2017 Pentagon base budget ended up in the coffers of corporate contractors. The portion of the "Operation and Maintenance" budget that is contracted out has grown from about 40% in 1999 to 57% of today's much larger budget – a bigger share of a much larger pie.

The largest US weapons makers have developed, lobbied for and now profit enormously from this new business model. In their book, [Top Secret America](#), Dana Priest and William Arkin revealed how General Dynamics, founded and headed for most of its history by [Barack Obama's patrons](#), the Crown family of Chicago, has exploited this outsourcing surge to become the largest supplier of IT services to the US government.

Priest and Arkin described how Pentagon contractors like General Dynamics have evolved from simply manufacturing weapons to playing [an integrated role](#) in military operations, targeted killings and the new surveillance state. "The evolution of General Dynamics was based on one simple strategy," they wrote: "Follow the money."

Priest and Arkin revealed that the largest weapons makers have secured the lions' share of the most lucrative new contracts. "Of the 1,900 or so companies working on top secret contracts in mid-2010, roughly 90 percent of the work was done by 6% (110) of them," Priest and Arkin explained. "To understand how these firms have come to dominate the post-9/11 era, there's no place better to look than...General Dynamics."

Trump's choice of General Dynamics board member General James Mattis as his first Defense Secretary personified the revolving door between the upper echelons of the armed forces, weapons manufacturers and the civilian branches of government that fuels this corrupt system of corporate militarism. This is exactly what President Eisenhower warned the American public against in [his farewell speech](#) in 1960, when he coined the term "Military-Industrial Complex."

What to do?

By contrast with Riedl, William Hartung, the director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy, told the *Washington Post* that the substantial cuts in military spending Jeff Stein was considering were [not unreasonable](#). "I think it's very reasonable in terms of still defending the country," said Hartung, "Though you would need a strategy to do it."

Such a strategy would have to start from a clear-eyed analysis of the 67%, or \$278 billion per year, inflation-adjusted increase in military spending between 1998 and 2019.

- How much of this increase is the result of US leaders' decisions to wage disastrous wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Libya, Syria and Yemen?

- And how much is the result of military-industrial interests leveraging this state of war to cash in on wish-lists of expensive new warships, warplanes and other weapons systems and the corrupt gravy train of corporate outsourcing I have already described?

The bipartisan 2010 [Sustainable Defense Task Force](#) convened by Congressman Barney Frank in 2010 answered these questions for the period 2001-2010, concluding that only 43% of military spending increases were related to the wars US forces were actually fighting, while 57% were not related to current wars.

Since 2010, while the US has continued and even expanded its [air wars](#) and [covert operations](#), it has brought home most of its occupation forces from Afghanistan and Iraq,

handing over bases and ground combat operations to local proxy forces. The FY2010 Pentagon budget was [\\$801.5 billion](#), only a few billion shy of Bush's \$806 billion FY2008 budget, a post-WW II record. But in 2019, US military spending is only \$106 billion (or 13%) lower than in 2010.

A breakdown of the small cuts since 2010 makes it clear that an even higher proportion of today's military spending is non-war-related. While Operation and Maintenance costs have dropped by 15.5% and Military Construction costs have shrunk by 62.5%, the Pentagon's budget for Procurement and RDT&E has only been cut by 4.5% since the 2010 peak of Obama's escalation in Afghanistan. (Once again, these figures are all in "FY2019 Constant Dollars" from the Pentagon's DOD [Green Book](#).)

So large amounts of money can be cut from the military budget just by seriously applying the discipline on which the military prides itself to the way it spends our country's money. The Pentagon has already determined it should [close 22%](#) of its military bases in the US and around the world, but the trillions of dollars with which Trump and Congress keep flooding its accounts have persuaded it to put off closing hundreds of redundant bases.

But reforming US military and foreign policy requires more than just closing redundant bases and fighting rampant waste, fraud and abuse. After 20 years of war, it is way past time to admit that the aggressive militarism that the US adopted to exploit its position as a "sole superpower" after the end of the Cold War, and then to [respond to the crimes](#) of September 11th, has been a catastrophic and bloody failure, making the world much more dangerous without making Americans any safer.

So the US also faces an urgent foreign policy imperative for a new commitment to international cooperation, diplomacy and the rule of international law. The US's illegal reliance on the threat and use of force as our country's main foreign policy tool is a greater threat to the whole world than any of the countries the US has attacked since 2001 ever were to the United States.

But whether the Military-Industrial Complex uses our nation's resources to fight catastrophic wars or just to line its own pockets, maintaining a trillion-dollar war machine that costs more than the [seven to ten](#) next largest militaries in the world put together creates an ever-present danger. Like [Madeleine Albright](#) on the Clinton transition team in 1992, new US administrations come into office asking, "What's the good of having this wonderful military you're always talking about if we're not allowed to use it?"

So the very existence of this war machine and the rationales conjured up to justify it become self-fulfilling, leading to the dangerous illusion that the US can and therefore should try to impose its political will by force on other countries and people around the world.

A Progressive Foreign Policy

So what would an alternative, progressive US foreign policy look like?

- If the United States were to comply with the [renunciation of war](#) as an “instrument of national policy” in the 1928 Kellogg Briand Pact and the prohibition against the threat or use of force in the [UN Charter](#), what kind of Department of Defense would we actually need? The answer is self-evident: a Department of *Defense*.
- If the US was committed to serious diplomacy with Russia, China and other nuclear-armed nations to gradually dismantle our nuclear arsenals, as they already agreed to in the [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty \(NPT\)](#), how quickly could the US join the 2017 Treaty on the [Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) (TPNW), to eliminate the greatest existential threat facing us all? This answer is also self-evident: the sooner the better.
- Once we no longer wield our military forces and weapons to threaten illegal aggression against other countries, which of our budget-busting weapons systems can we manufacture and maintain in much smaller numbers? And which can we do without altogether? These questions would require some detailed and hard-nosed analysis, but they must be asked -and answered.

Phyllis Bennis of the Institute for Policy Studies made a good start on answering some of these questions at the underlying policy level in an [August 2018 article](#) in *In These Times* titled, "A Bold Foreign Policy Platform for the New Wave of Left Lawmakers." Bennis wrote that,

"A progressive foreign policy must reject US military and economic domination and instead be grounded in global cooperation, human rights, respect for international law and privileging diplomacy over war."

Bennis proposed:

- Serious diplomacy for peace and disarmament with Russia, China, North Korea and Iran;
- Abolishing NATO as an obsolete and dangerous relic of the Cold War;
- Ending the self-fulfilling cycle of violence and chaos unleashed by the US’s militarized "War on Terror";
- Ending US military aid and unconditional diplomatic support for Israel;
- Ending US military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen;

- Ending US threats and economic sanctions against Iran, North Korea and Venezuela;
 - Reversing the creeping militarization of US relations with Africa and Latin America.
- Even without a progressive policy platform that would transform the U.S.'s existing aggressive military posture, Barney Frank's 2010 [Sustainable Defense Task Force](#) proposed cuts of about a trillion dollars over ten years. The main details of its recommendations were:
- Reduce US nuclear posture to 1,000 nuclear warheads on 7 submarines and 160 Minuteman missiles;
 - Reduce overall troop strength by 50,000 (with partial withdrawals from Asia and Europe);
 - A 230 ship navy, with 9 "big-deck" aircraft carriers (we now have 11, plus 2 under construction and 2 more on order, plus 9 smaller amphibious assault ships or helicopter carriers);
 - Two fewer Air Force wings;
 - Buy less costly alternatives to the F-35 fighter, MV-22 Osprey vertical takeoff plane, Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle and KC-X air tanker;
 - Reform [top-heavy](#) military command structures (one general or admiral per 1,500 troops in 2019);
 - Reform the military healthcare system.

So how much more could we cut from the bloated military budget in the context of serious progressive reforms to US foreign policy and a new commitment to the rule of international law?

The US has designed and built a war machine to threaten and conduct offensive military operations anywhere in the world. It responds to crises, wherever they are and including ones it created itself, by declaring that "all options are on the table," including the threat of military force. That is an illegal threat, in violation of the [UN Charter's](#) prohibition against the threat or use of force.

US officials politically justify their threats and uses of force by claiming that they are to "defend US vital interests." But, as the U.K.'s senior legal adviser [told his government](#) during the Suez crisis in 1956, "The plea of vital interests, which has been one of the main justifications for wars in the past, is indeed the very one which the (UN) Charter was intended to exclude as a basis for armed intervention in another country."

One country trying to impose its will on countries and people all over the world by the threat and use of force is not the rule of law – it is [imperialism](#). Progressive policymakers and politicians should insist that the United States must live by the binding rules of international

law that previous generations of US leaders and statesmen have agreed to and by which we judge other countries' behavior. As our recent history demonstrates, the alternative is a predictable downward slide into the law of the jungle, with ever-proliferating violence and chaos in country after country.

Conclusion

First of all, eliminating our nuclear arsenal through multilateral treaties and disarmament agreements is not just possible. It is essential.

Next, how many "big-deck" nuclear-powered aircraft carriers will we need to defend our own shores, play a cooperative role in keeping the world's shipping lanes safe and take part in legitimate UN peacekeeping missions? The answer to this question is the number we should keep and maintain, even if it is zero.

The same hard-nosed analysis must be applied to each element in the military budget, from closing bases to buying more of existing or new weapons systems. The answers to all these questions must be based on our country's legitimate defense needs, not on any US politician or general's ambitions to "win" illegal wars or bend other countries to their will by economic warfare and "all options are on the table" threats.

This reform of US foreign and defense policy should be conducted with one eye on a transcript of President Eisenhower's [farewell speech](#). We must not allow the vital transformation of the US war machine into a legitimate Department of Defense to be controlled or corrupted by the "unwarranted influence" of the Military-Industrial Complex.

As Eisenhower said, "Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together."

A legitimate Department of Defense should provide the United States with better foreign policy outcomes for no more than half the cost of our current budget-busting war machine. Every Member of Congress should therefore vote against final passage of the wasteful, corrupt and dangerous FY2020 military budget.

And as part of a progressive and legitimate reform of US foreign and defense policy, the next President of the United States, whoever he or she may be, must make it a national priority to cut US military spending by at least 50%.

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