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Will Trump Ride Pentagon Spending to Reelection?

Donald Trump likes to posture as a tough guy and part of that tough-guy persona involves bragging about how much he's spent on the U.S. military. This tendency was on full display in a tweet he posted three days after an American drone killed Iranian Major General Qassem Suleimani in Baghdad:

“The United States just spent Two Trillion Dollars on Military Equipment. We are the biggest and by far the BEST in the World! If Iran attacks an American Base, or any American, we will be sending some of that brand new beautiful equipment their way... and without hesitation!”

That tweet was as much a message to the American public as to Iran's rulers. Its subtext: that Donald J. Trump (and he alone) has restored the U.S. military to greatness after two terms of neglect under the less-than-watchful eye of Barack Obama, that he's not afraid to use it, and that he deserves credit for everything he's done, which means, of course, widespread political support. Never mind that Washington has “only” spent about one-third of his claimed \$2 trillion on military equipment since he took office and that Pentagon spending reached a post-World War II record high in the Obama years. No surprise there: Trump has never let the facts get in the way of a good story he's dying to tell.

He has, by the way, made similar claims to his most important audience of all: his donors. At a January 17th get-together with key supporters at Mar-a-Lago, his lavish Florida resort, he bragged that Pentagon spending had increased by \$2.5 trillion on his watch. In fact, that figure is closer to total Pentagon spending in the Trump years. For his claim to

be accurate, the Pentagon budget would have had to be \$0 in January 2017 when he entered the Oval Office. Still, however outlandish what he says about the military may be, the underlying theme remains remarkably consistent: I'm the guy who's funding our military like never before, so you should keep supporting me big time.

Don't get me wrong. In collaboration with Congress, Donald Trump has indeed boosted the Pentagon budget to near-record levels. At \$738 billion this year alone, it's already substantially higher than U.S. spending at the peaks of the Korean and Vietnam Wars or during the Reagan military buildup of the 1980s. It's more than the total amount spent by the next seven nations in the world combined (five of which are U.S. allies). Only Donald Trump could manage to distort, misstate, and exaggerate sums that are already beyond belief in the service of an inflated self-image and ambitious political objectives.

Political Manipulation and “Jobs, Jobs, Jobs”

President Trump's recent antics should come as no surprise. His use of Pentagon spending and military assistance for political gain has been hiding in plain sight since he entered the Oval Office. After all, that's what the impeachment charges against him were all about. He was manipulating U.S. military aid to Ukraine to strong-arm its government into generating dirt on Joe Biden whom Trump, obsessed by poll numbers, saw at the time as his most threatening rival.

And don't forget the president's penchant for dipping into the Pentagon budget to pay for his cherished wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, a vanity project that plays extremely well with his political base. So far, he's proposed taking \$13.3 billion from the Defense Department's budget to fund that “big, fat, beautiful wall,” \$6.1 billion of which has already been granted to him. For good measure, Trump pushed the Pentagon to award a \$400 million contract for building part of the wall to Fisher Sand and Gravel, a North Dakota firm owned by one of his donors.

For Trump, the Ukraine scandal and the wall aside, the real politics of Pentagon spending — that is, of translating military dollars into potential votes in 2020 — will come, he hopes, from his relentless touting of the alleged jobs being generated by weapons production. His initial major foray into portraying the buying and selling of arms as a jobs program for the American people occurred during a May 2017 trip to Saudi Arabia, his first foreign visit as president. He promptly announced a \$110 billion arms deal with the Saudi regime that would, he swore, mean “jobs, jobs, jobs” in the United States.

In reality, the agreement itself — and the jobs to come from it — were both far less than advertised, but the message was clear enough: this country's deal-maker extraordinaire was selling weapons over there and bringing jobs back in a major way to the good old U.S. of A. Even though many of the vaunted arms deals he boasted about had been reached during the Obama years, he had, he insisted, gotten the Saudis to pay through the nose for weaponry that would put staggering numbers of Americans to work.

The Saudi gambit was planned well in advance. In the middle of a meeting with a Saudi delegation in a reception room next door to the White House, Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner suddenly called Lockheed Martin CEO Marillyn Hewson. He asked her about a missile-defense system the administration wanted to include in the mega-arms package the president was planning to announce during his upcoming visit to the Kingdom. According to a New York Times account of the meeting, the Saudis' jaws dropped when Kushner dialed up Hewson in front of them. They were amazed that things actually worked that way in Trump's America. That call apparently did the trick, as the Lockheed missile-defense system was indeed incorporated into the arms deal to come.

The arms-sales-equals-jobs drumbeat continued when Trump returned home from his foreign travels, most notably in a March 2018 White House meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. There, in front of TV cameras, the president brandished a map showing where tens of thousands of U.S. jobs linked to those Saudi arms deals would supposedly be created. Many of them were concentrated in states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan that had provided his margin of victory in the 2016 election.

His trumpeting of employment linked to Saudi arms sales went further over the top when he claimed that more than half a million American jobs were tied to the sales his administration had negotiated. The real number is expected to be less than a tenth of that total and well under .03% of the U.S. labor force of more than 164 million people.

Much as Trump would like Americans to believe that U.S. weapons transfers to the brutal Saudi dictatorship are a boon to the economy, they are, in reality, barely a blip on the radar screen of total national employment. The question, of course, is whether enough voters will believe the president's Saudi arms fairy tale to give him a bump in support.

Even after the Saudi regime's murder of journalist and critic Jamal Khashoggi, the president continued to argue that the revenues from those arms deals were a reason to

avoid a political rupture with that nation. Unlike on so many other issues, Trump's claims on arms sales and jobs are maddeningly consistent, if also maddeningly off the mark.

Trump to Ohio: "You Better Love Me"

Perhaps the president's most blatant linkage of Pentagon spending-related jobs to his political future came in a March 2019 speech at an Army tank plant in Lima, Ohio. After a round of "U.S.A! U.S.A.!" chants from the assembled crowd, Trump got right down to it:

"Well, you better love me; I kept this place open, that I can tell you. [Applause.] They said, 'We're closing it.' And I said, 'No we're not.' And now you're doing record business... And I'm thrilled to be here in Ohio with the hardworking men and women of Lima."

Of course, the president wasn't actually responsible for keeping the plant open. In the early 2010s, the Army had a plan to put that plant on "mothball" status for a few years because it already had 6,000 tanks — far more than it needed. But that plan had been ditched before Trump ever took office in no small part due to bipartisan pressure from the Ohio congressional delegation.

Misleading statements aside, the Lima plant is doing just fine at a time when the Pentagon budget is running at nearly three-quarters of a trillion dollars per year, and Trump is capitalizing on it. He repeatedly returned to the jobs argument in his Lima speech, and even reeled off a list of other parts of the country involved in tank production:

"Our investment will also support thousands of additional jobs across our nation to assemble these incredible Abrams tanks. The engines are from Alabama, transmissions are from Indiana, special armor from Idaho, and the 120-millimeter gun — and the gun parts from upstate New York and from Pennsylvania. All great places. In Ohio alone, almost 200 suppliers churn out parts and materials that go into every tank that rolls off this factory's floor. Incredible."

Trump may not be able to find all the places in which the U.S. is at war on a map, but he's made a point of getting well briefed on where the money that fuels the U.S. war machine goes, because he views that information as essential to his political fortunes in 2020.

The Domestic Economics of Weapons Spending

What Trump failed to mention in his Lima speech is that much of America is not heavily dependent on Pentagon weapons outlays. The F-35 combat aircraft, the most expensive weapons system in history and widely touted as a major job creator, is a case in point. The plane's producer, Lockheed Martin, claims that the project has created 125,000 jobs spread over 45 states. The reality is far less impressive. My own analysis suggests that the F-35 program produces less than half as many jobs as Lockheed claims and that more than half of them are located in just two states — California and Texas. In fact, many of them are located overseas.

Most states are not heavily dependent on Pentagon spending. According to that institution's own figures, in 39 of the 50 states less than 3% of the economy is tied to it. In other words, 97% or more of the economic activity in most of the country has nothing to do with such spending.

In reality, despite the dreams and claims of the president, the national economy as a whole, as well as the economies of the vast majority of states, would be far better off if Pentagon spending were reduced and the funds freed up were invested elsewhere. That's because it's actually a particularly poor job creator. Spending on infrastructure or green-energy projects, for example, would create one and one-half times as many jobs as Pentagon spending does. Putting the same money into the public education system would create roughly twice as many jobs. In 2019, in a paper for Brown University's Costs of War Project, Heidi Peltier showed that shifting \$125 billion per year from the Pentagon to green manufacturing would result in a net increase of 250,000 jobs nationwide.

As for places that do depend on Pentagon dollars in a significant way, recent polling shows that even residents of those areas are willing to support cuts in the Department of Defense's bloated budget. Writing in the Nation, Guy Saperstein of the New Ideas Fund and Ploughshares Fund President Joe Cirincione note: "Our polling suggests that the majority of voters will still call for cuts in Pentagon spending even if it affects their local communities, both because they believe their communities will recover and the money could be spent in more productive ways in the long run."

That sentiment was remarkably strong in such communities, with 77% of poll participants agreeing with the statement that "members of Congress who use the Pentagon budget to send more jobs to their districts should find ways to support their local economies by building things that actually improve people's lives."

The best option for creating alternative jobs for workers displaced by a reduction in Pentagon spending is large-scale investment in green energy and sustainable infrastructure. Not only could a comprehensive Green New Deal create millions of new jobs, but it would provide employment across a broad range of occupations, potentially absorbing workers from defense, coal, and other industries. The only issue is political will, no small problem in Washington in the Trump years. Even a progressive president would undoubtedly encounter serious difficulty enacting such changes if the Senate remains in Republican hands after the 2020 elections.

Will Trump's Gamble Work?

Donald Trump isn't the first president to try to parlay Pentagon funding into political support, but he's been more aggressive and systematic in his efforts than any president in memory. That doesn't necessarily mean the ploy will work. Admittedly, there are high profile weapons projects in key swing states like Ohio (tanks), Pennsylvania (artillery), and Wisconsin (combat ships and armored vehicles). Still, in 2020, many voters are visibly looking for more than just business as usual, as evidenced by significant support for initiatives like the Green New Deal.

Running as the candidate of the military-industrial complex while ignoring urgent problems like climate change may not prove to be the magic formula for political success Trump expects it to be. That could be especially true if his opponents put forward concrete plans to create new non-military jobs in areas particularly dependent on the Pentagon budget.

Ten months from now we'll know whether Trump's attempt to ride the Pentagon to reelection was a wise gamble or ultimate foolishness. In the meantime, tax dollars going into the U.S. military continue to rise.

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