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US: No money for COVID tests, blank check for the military

On Wednesday, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki rejected the idea of sending free COVID-19 tests to all Americans to protect against the dangerous new Omicron variant, pressing reporters, “How much would that cost?”

At wholesale prices of approximately \$1 per test (the going price in Germany), it would cost approximately \$329 million. Sending every single American a COVID-19 test would cost the equivalent of less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the military budget, the largest in history, passed Friday by the US House of Representatives.

In other words, the military budget is 2,000 times more expensive than this critical measure to protect Americans against COVID-19, the single greatest threat to their lives, more deadly than cancer, heart disease, smoking and auto accidents.

The massive budget weighs in at \$740 billion, with another \$28 billion thrown in for the US Department of Energy to develop additional nuclear weapons.

Former President Donald Trump repeatedly boasted of his record military budgets. But this budget is tens of billions of dollars larger than anything ever passed under Trump—a budget far, far larger than even the Biden administration or Pentagon asked for.

The 2022 National Defense Authorization Act, the summary of which alone is over 600 pages, was released just six hours before the overwhelming majority of lawmakers in both parties voted on it.



An F-35 production line (Credit: Lockheed Martin)

Included in the bill are, to quote the official summary of its weapons systems:

- “\$4.9 billion for Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, an increase of \$2.9 billion to build three guided missile destroyers in fiscal year 2022.”
- “A \$4.7 billion increase for shipbuilding, including 5 additional battle force ships: 2 destroyers, 2 expeditionary fast transports, and 1 fleet oiler”
- “\$3.1 billion for the Columbia-class submarine program, an increase of \$130 million, for industrial base development and expansion in support of the Virginia and Columbia shipbuilding programs.”
- “\$6.6 billion for the procurement of two Virginia-class submarines and advance procurement of future submarines, including an additional \$200 million to expand the submarine industrial base.”
- “\$4.4 billion for the F-35A program, including an increase of \$175 million for the purchase of F135 power modules and the resources to begin upgrading the fleet to TR-3/Block 4 capability.”
- “\$1.0 billion for 12 F/A-18E/F aircraft”

It includes further lump-sum appropriations for “great power” conflicts against Russia and China:

- “Extends and modifies the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) to realign DOD efforts towards PDI objectives and identifies approximately \$7.1 billion in FY22 investments [to counter China]”
- “Increases funding by \$50 million for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which authorizes the Secretary of Defense, with the concurrence of the Secretary of State, to provide security assistance and intelligence support to military and other security forces of the Government of Ukraine [as part of a military-buildup challenging Russia]”

But the largest portion of the bill deals with funding the United States multi-trillion-dollar nuclear buildup, focusing on the creation of smaller, more “usable” nuclear weapons:

- “Authorizes \$20.2 billion for the activities of the NNSA [National Nuclear Security Administration]”
- “Authorizes \$6.48 billion for the Department of Energy’s defense environmental cleanup activities”

Commenting on this bloated handout to defense contractors, journalist and historian Fred Kaplan asked, “Did anyone even look at the massive defense budget before passing it?”

Kaplan added, “No officials or lawmakers have spelled out why the budget—which includes \$740 billion for the Pentagon and \$28 billion for the Energy Department’s nuclear-weapons programs—needs to be quite this huge.”

Kaplan adds,

Critics of government spending on domestic programs frequently complain about “throwing money at a problem.” Yet that is exactly what Congress is doing with the defense budget. When Biden submitted his infrastructure and Build Back Better plans, a few legislators from both parties got together with the White House to pare down their size, narrowing the definition of “infrastructure,” reordering priorities, and questioning the urgency of some needs. One can argue about the final result, but Congress subjected Biden’s plan to legitimate oversight and analysis.

There has been almost no oversight or analysis of this defense budget.

With inflation soaring to levels unseen in decades, all US fiscal spending is being reviewed with a fine-tooth comb. The vast majority of social spending projects, including child care and student loan forgiveness that Biden campaigned on, are being thrown out the window, based on the claim that additional government spending will contribute to inflation.

And yet, when it comes to the military, anything goes. The generals simply get everything on their Christmas wish list and then more in the form of unspecified and unenumerated slush funds.

The dominant thinking driving this insane level of military spending was outlined in a new book by Elbridge Colby, a lead author of the US 2018 national defense strategy, as well as the 2018 essay, “If You Want Peace, Prepare for Nuclear War.” In his latest book entitled *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, Colby writes,

Pandemics do not put geopolitics on hold; power politics exists even during and after such outbreaks. They may even intensify geopolitical competition. ... This means that, while the effort and expense required to control the threat of pandemic disease may be very great, these efforts do not logically trade against national security requirements.

But, as economists like to say, “All dollars are green.” A \$70 million spent on an F-35 is 70 million Americans who do not get a COVID-19 test.

What is behind America’s binge in military spending? As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned in October, “Under conditions of deepening social, political and economic crisis, dominant sections of the American ruling class see a conflict with China as a mechanism for enforcing ‘national unity,’ which means, in practice, suppressing and criminalizing domestic opposition.”

If American capitalism cannot afford to protect the population from COVID-19, it at least has the resources to use a foreign conflict as a pretext for a crackdown at home.

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