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Spending Unlimited



Image by Christine Roy.

The White House released its budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2025 on March 11th, and the news was depressingly familiar: \$895 billion for the Pentagon and work on nuclear weapons at the Department of Energy. After adjusting for inflation, that's only slightly less than last year's proposal, but far higher than the levels reached during either the Korean or Vietnam wars or at the height of the Cold War. And that figure doesn't even include related spending on veterans, the Department of Homeland Security, or the additional tens of billions of dollars in "emergency" military spending likely to come later this year. One thing is all too obvious: a trillion-dollar budget for the Pentagon alone is right around the corner, at the

expense of urgently needed action to address climate change, epidemics of disease, economic inequality, and other issues that threaten our lives and safety at least as much as, if not more than, traditional military challenges.

Americans would be hard-pressed to find members of Congress carefully scrutinizing such vast sums of national security spending, asking tough questions, or reining in Pentagon excess — despite the fact that this country is no longer fighting any major ground wars. Just a handful of senators and members of the House do that work while many more search for ways to increase the department's already bloated budget and steer further contracts into their own states and districts.

Congress isn't just shirking its oversight duties: these days, it can't even seem to pass a budget on time. Our elected representatives settled on a final national budget just last week, leaving Pentagon spending at the already generous 2023 level for nearly half of the 2024 fiscal year. Now, the department will be inundated with a flood of new money that it has to spend in about six months instead of a year. More waste, fraud, and financial abuse are inevitable as the Pentagon prepares to shovel money out the door as quickly as possible. This is no way to craft a budget or defend a country.

And while congressional dysfunction is par for the course, in this instance it offers an opportunity to reevaluate what we're spending all this money *for*. The biggest driver of overspending is an unrealistic, self-indulgent, and — yes — militaristic national defense strategy. It's designed to maintain a capacity to go almost everywhere and do almost anything, from winning wars with rival superpowers to intervening in key regions across the planet to continuing the disastrous Global War on Terror, which was launched in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and never truly ended. As long as such a “cover the globe” strategy persists, the pressure to continue spending ever more on the Pentagon will prove irresistible, no matter how delusional the rationale for doing so may be.

Defending “the Free World”?

President Biden began his recent State of the Union address by comparing the present moment to the time when the United States was preparing to enter World War II. Like President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1941, Joe Biden told the American people that the country now faces an “unprecedented moment in the history of the Union,” one in which freedom and democracy are “under attack” both at home and abroad. He disparaged Congress's failure to approve his emergency supplemental bill, claiming that, without additional aid for Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin will threaten not just that country but all of Europe and even the “free world.” Comparing (as he did) the challenge

posed by Russia now to the threat that Hitler's regime posed in World War II is a major exaggeration that's of no value in developing an effective response to Moscow's activities in Ukraine and beyond.

Engaging in such fearmongering to get the public on board with an increasingly militarized foreign policy ignores reality in service of the status quo. In truth, Russia poses no direct security threat to the United States. And while Putin may have ambitions beyond Ukraine, Russia simply doesn't have the capability to threaten the "free world" with a military campaign. Neither does China, for that matter. But facing the facts about these powers would require a critical reassessment of the maximalist U.S. defense strategy that rules the roost. Currently, it reflects the profoundly misguided belief that, on matters of national security, U.S. military dominance takes precedence over the collective economic strength and prosperity of Americans.

As a result, the administration places more emphasis on deterring potential (if unlikely) aggression from competitors than on improving relations with them. Of course, this approach depends almost entirely on increasing the production, distribution, and stockpiling of arms. The war in Ukraine and Israel's continuing assault on Gaza have unfortunately only solidified the administration's dedication to the concept of military-centric deterrence.

Contractor Dysfunction: Earning More, Doing Less

Ironically, such a defense strategy depends on an industry that continually exploits the government for its own benefit and wastes staggering amounts of taxpayer dollars. The major corporations that act as military contractors pocket about half of all Pentagon outlays while ripping off the government in a multitude of ways. But what's even more striking is how little they accomplish with the hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars they receive year in, year out. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), from 2020 to 2022, the total number of major defense acquisition programs actually declined even as total costs and average delivery time for new weapons systems increased.

Take the Navy's top acquisition program, for example. Earlier this month, the news broke that the Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine is already at least a year behind schedule. That sub is the sea-based part of the next-generation nuclear (air-sea-and-land) triad that the administration considers the "ultimate backstop" for global deterrence. As a key part of this country's never-ending arms buildup, the Columbia is supposedly the Navy's most important program, so you might wonder why the Pentagon hasn't implemented a single one of the GAO's six recommendations to help keep it on track.

As the GAO report made clear, the Navy proposed delivering the first Columbia-class vessel in record time — a wildly unrealistic goal — despite it being the “largest and most complex submarine” in its history.

Yet the war economy persists, even as the giant weapons corporations deliver less weaponry for more money in an ever more predictable fashion (and often way behind schedule as well). This happens in part because the Pentagon regularly advances weapons programs before design and testing are even completed, a phenomenon known as “concurrent development.” Building systems before they’re fully tested means, of course, rushing them into production at the taxpayer’s expense before the bugs are out. Not surprisingly, operations and maintenance costs account for about 70% of the money spent on any U.S. weapons program. Lockheed Martin’s F-35 is the classic example of this enormously expensive tendency. The Pentagon just greenlit the fighter jet for full-scale production this month, 23 *years* (yes, that’s not a misprint!) after the program was launched. The fighter has suffered from persistent engine problems and deficient software. But the official go-ahead from the Pentagon means little, since Congress has long funded the F-35 as if it were already approved for full-scale production. At a projected cost of at least \$1.7 trillion over its lifetime, America’s most expensive weapons program ever should offer a lesson in the necessity of trying before buying.

Unfortunately, this lesson is lost on those who need to learn it the most. Acquisition failures of the past never seem to financially impact the executives or shareholders of America’s biggest military contractors. On the contrary, those corporate leaders depend on Pentagon bloat and overpriced, often unnecessary weaponry. In 2023, America’s biggest military contractor, Lockheed Martin, paid its CEO John Taiclet \$22.8 million. Annual compensation for the CEOs of RTX, Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics, and Boeing ranged from \$14.5 and \$22.5 million in the past two years. And shareholders of those weapons makers are similarly cashing in. The arms industry increased cash paid to its shareholders by 73% in the 2010s compared to the prior decade. And they did so at the expense of investing in their own businesses. Now they expect taxpayers to bail them out to ramp up weapons production for Ukraine and Israel.

Reining in the Military-Industrial Complex

One way to begin reining in runaway Pentagon spending is to eliminate the ability of Congress and the president to arbitrarily increase that department’s budget. The best way to do so would be by doing away with the very concept of “emergency spending.” Otherwise, thanks to such spending, that \$895 billion Pentagon budget will undoubtedly prove to be

anything but a ceiling on military spending next year. As an example, the \$95 billion aid package for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan that passed the Senate in February is still hung up in the House, but some portion of it will eventually get through and add substantially to the Pentagon's already enormous budget.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon has fallen back on the same kind of budgetary maneuvers it perfected at the peak of its disastrous Afghan and Iraq wars earlier in this century, adding billions to the war budget to fund items on the department's wish list that have little to do with "defense" in our present world. That includes emergency outlays destined to expand this country's "defense industrial base" and further supersize the military-industrial complex — an expensive loophole that Congress should simply shut down. That, however, will undoubtedly prove a tough political fight, given how many stakeholders — from Pentagon officials to those corporate executives to compromised members of Congress — benefit from such spending sprees.

Ultimately, of course, the debate about Pentagon spending should be focused on far more than the staggering sums being spent. It should be about the impact of such spending on this planet. That includes the Biden administration's stubborn continuation of support for Israel's campaign of mass slaughter in Gaza, which has already killed more than 31,000 people while putting many more at risk of starvation. A recent *Washington Post* investigation found that the U.S. has made 100 arms sales to Israel since the start of the war last October, most of them set at value thresholds just low enough to bypass any requirement to report them to Congress.

The relentless supply of military equipment to a government that the International Court of Justice has said is plausibly engaged in a genocidal campaign is a deep moral stain on the foreign-policy record of the Biden administration, as well as a blow to American credibility and influence globally. No amount of airdrops or humanitarian supplies through a makeshift port can remotely make up for the damage still being done by U.S.-supplied weapons in Gaza.

The case of Gaza may be extreme in its brutality and the sheer speed of the slaughter, but it underscores the need to thoroughly rethink both the purpose of and funding for America's foreign and military policies. It's hard to imagine a more devastating example than Gaza of why the use of force so often makes matters far, far worse — particularly in conflicts rooted in longstanding political and social despair. A similar point could have been made with respect to the calamitous U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan that cost untold numbers of lives, while pouring yet more money into the coffers of America's major weapons makers.

Both of those military campaigns, of course, failed disastrously in their stated objectives of promoting democracy, or at least stability, in troubled regions, even as they exacted huge costs in blood and treasure.

Before our government moves full speed ahead expanding the weapons industry and further militarizing geopolitical challenges posed by China and Russia, we should reflect on America's disastrous performance in the costly, prolonged wars already waged in this century. After all, they did enormous damage, made the world a far more dangerous place, and only increased the significance of those weapons makers. Throwing another trillion dollars-plus at the Pentagon won't change that.

This piece first appeared at [TomDispatch](#).

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