

Spending habits: The defense budget

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The U.S. defense budget, always outsized, has become even more bloated in recent years. In the past eight years military spending has nearly doubled, with much of the increase devoted to financing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. A year ago Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University and Linda Bilmes of Harvard predicted that the Iraq war could cost the U.S. \$3 trillion. Well before the current economic crisis arose, they warned that this expenditure was weakening the U.S. economy: “You can’t spend \$3 trillion . . . on a failed war abroad and not feel the pain at home.”

There are some signs that President Obama might try to change the Pentagon’s spending habits. Part of his deficit-reduction plan is to stop issuing no-bid military contracts that have wasted billions of dollars and to stop paying for cold-war-era weapons systems. He has also promised to include funding for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars in the defense budget rather than treat it as a special funding request, so that the true costs are clear. And in regard to nuclear weapons, the Obama budget cuts out all funds for the so-called Reliable Replacement Warhead program.

Another place to cut is the F-22 fighter jet, made by Lockheed Martin. According to Reuters, each F-22 costs \$143 million, not counting development costs. So far 135 of the 183 jets budgeted have been delivered to the air force. But the plane is of limited use in fighting terrorism. Those billions could be put to better use.

However, it’s very hard for the White House to cut spending on the fighter planes, since the various manufacturers and suppliers are located in many congressional districts throughout the U.S. Since members of Congress want to keep jobs in their districts, there is broad bipartisan support for the spending. Such is the power of the military-industrial complex. But what if these manufacturing plants could be directed toward other economic purposes?

It’s not just that the U.S. can’t afford all the defense expenditures requested. The U.S. needs to adjust its spending priorities to reflect a different way of using power. According to a study by the Center for American Progress, 87 percent of security

funding in the 2009 budget goes to the military, only 8 percent for homeland security and only 5 percent for nonmilitary engagement. The U.S. needs to shift its priorities toward emphasizing diplomacy, building up multilateral relationships and addressing the economic conditions that lead to political insecurity and unrest.