

Immodest proposal: Cutting military spending

by [James L. Hecht](#) in the [May 12, 1999](#) issue

Every gun that is made," said Dwight Eisenhower, "every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in a final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. The world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists and the hopes of its children."

These words are as pertinent today as they were when spoken 45 years ago. They are especially relevant since the U.S. is senselessly wasting tens of billions of dollars in military expenditures--many that could be used to address needs at home and abroad.

Why do we have this waste? Americans rightly support a strong defense. National security is the most important function of government. Not surprisingly, an opinion study found that 72 percent felt it was better to err in the direction of having too much defense than too little.

However, when asked how much the U.S. should spend on defense, 42 percent favored spending a little more than the strongest potential adversary and another 41 percent thought spending should equal what all potential adversaries spend (the potential adversaries listed were Russia, China, Iraq, Iran, North Korea and Libya). But the U.S. actually spends more than twice as much as all potential adversaries combined. (For per annum figures, see chart on p. 539.)

If we are to reduce military expenditures, we must understand how the Pentagon and Congress have justified huge expenditures and what is wrong with the arguments they've used. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the Pentagon established a new criterion for American military capabilities: the U.S. should be able simultaneously to fight and win two major regional wars without the help of allies. This two-war doctrine is rooted in the idea that the U.S. should be able to exercise unilaterally its "global responsibilities." There are, of course, advantages to acting

alone. We spare ourselves the frustration of having to compromise with countries that do not share our worldview. In addition, unilateral action allows us to respond more quickly.

But acting alone has huge costs. We focus the anger of our opponents directly on us, making Americans more likely to be targeted by terrorists. And there is a financial cost. A public opinion study indicates that not only do a clear majority of people oppose the two-war doctrine on principle, but fewer than one-quarter of Americans favor it after they are told of the cost.

But there is an even stronger argument against the two-war doctrine. While the world needs a policeman, and the U.S. has the military capability to pursue such a policy, we do not have the popular will to pursue it, for Americans are unwilling to accept casualties.

The military budget is driven much more by the desire of members of Congress to get reelected than by the country's needs and realistic aims. The best-known example is the difficulty of closing unneeded military bases. The most egregious example is the role of defense contractors in promoting unneeded weapons systems. Eisenhower warned of the influence of the military-industrial complex--influence that has become much greater than could have been predicted in Eisenhower's time because of the increased importance of money in political campaigns. Campaign contributions in 1996 by weapons-makers averaged \$18,065 for every member of Congress, almost three times the level of tobacco-industry influence peddling.

One result is that although the American F-15 and F-16 fighters are better than any other military aircraft, the air force has developed the F-22, an even better fighter, and is now purchasing over 300 at a cost of \$187 million each. At this cost there is no reason to buy fighter planes "better than the best"; worn-out planes can be retrofitted for \$20 million or replaced with a new plane for \$40 million.

But that would mean less business for the defense industry, which is currently developing the Joint Strike Fighter, an even better plane.

Another example of an unneeded weapon is the New Attack Submarine. This submarine was developed to hunt down and destroy the next generation of Soviet submarines. Never mind that there is no next generation of Russian submarines, and that most Russian submarines are rusting away because there is no money to

maintain them--we are building four New Attack Submarines at a cost of \$13 billion.

The C-130 is a good cargo transport plane, but there is already a huge fleet of them. Thus the one C-130 the Pentagon requested for this year's budget probably was not needed. But that didn't stop Congress from increasing the number to seven at a cost of \$435 million. (The planes are manufactured in Newt Gingrich's district.)

The current NATO action in Yugoslavia underscores the point. There is no evidence of a need to upgrade the weapons systems on which tens of billions are being spent yearly. The only evident lack has been in spending for air-launched cruise missiles; there is no shortage of Tomahawk cruise missiles, which are launched from navy ships. Spending for precision-guided missiles for the air force has averaged \$130 million per year during the past decade, about 0.05 percent of the military budget.

Though no information has been released as to the composition of the NATO forces being used, it is obvious that the U.S. is carrying most of the load. It is difficult to rationalize why America should contribute as much as half of the forces. Consider: the U.S. is providing more than its share for European security, but has not yet found the resources to provide health care for all its citizens--something most of our NATO allies do provide.

What can people do to reduce the military budget besides letting members of Congress know that they should vote for less money for the Pentagon rather than more (as President Clinton requested in his State of the Union message)?

First, we must support not only reducing money for defense spending but also increasing expenditures for programs that will make cutting the military budget easier. One such program would be a generous package of severance pay, job training and educational benefits to defense workers and military personnel who lose their jobs. That would decrease the pressure on members of Congress to support unneeded military spending. Congress should take a lesson from how American business downsizes: be willing to spend up front to reap far larger savings later. To permanently get rid of \$1 billion in military spending a year, it would be worthwhile to provide benefits of as much as \$1 billion over a few years to those who would be hurt by the cuts.

If this were done, tens of billions of dollars could be put to work meeting vital social needs. This move would help the economy. Studies show that \$1 billion spent for military procurement creates about 25,000 jobs. Spent on education, this same sum

creates over 40,000 jobs; if spent on health care, it creates over 45,000 jobs. In addition, those who shift from defense work to other fields, particularly if they have additional training, would bring many needed skills to the workforce.

Spending should also be increased on international military efforts. The long-range goal should be to meet our global responsibilities by supporting a global military force. This would not only reduce costs in the long run but increase our security. This might be achieved through a reformed United Nations. Until that happens, we can more fully cooperate with other nations in various ways, such as ending our indebtedness to the UN and supporting international efforts to ban landmines.

A second way to help reduce military spending is to support organizations that are working to counter the army of lobbyists who represent the military-industrial complex. Two tax-exempt organizations devote almost their entire effort to reducing military spending.

The oldest of these is the Center for Defense Information, in Washington, which was founded in 1972 by retired military officers. With a research staff of at least six, CDI pinpoints situations in which military spending is wasteful and sends this information to a mailing list of the media and the organization's supporters. CDI also produces videos for television, which are used by a number of public broadcast stations. Dale Bumpers, former Democratic senator from Arkansas, recently joined CDI as its new director.

Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities, based in New York, was founded in 1996 for the purpose of shifting spending from defense into other areas, with education at the top of the list. BLSP, which relies on CDI and others for its research, seeks to use the financial contributions and the marketing skills of business executives to help persuade the public to demand an end to wasteful military spending.

BLSP has the potential to make a difference. Most business executives, who are practiced in making operations efficient, support what BLSP is trying to do. But until now few have campaigned for cuts in military spending. Instead, they have focused their political efforts on issues that directly affect the earnings of their companies: tax policies, environmental regulations, trade policies, etc. But overspending on defense has become so egregious and other needs so great that this could change.

By how much can the military budget be reduced? Many experts believe that \$40 billion could be saved without any loss of overall effectiveness. Paradoxically, giving

a deserved increase in pay to military personnel would contribute to this saving by preventing highly trained specialists from leaving the armed forces for better-paying civilian jobs. The long-range potential for savings is even greater. If we discharged our global responsibilities only in cooperation with other nations, within ten years we could reduce our military spending by over \$100 billion in today's dollars.

CDI, BLSP and other organizations that support decreasing the military budget will never match the military-industrial complex in number of lobbyists or financial contributions. But the case for decreased military spending is strong. If there is sufficient support to get the message across, and if that support is used intelligently, the case can be made and won.