

That Pesky Pentagon Budget

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The first round has gone to the White House in what is sure to become a protracted battle with Congress over the new defense budget.

What is not sure is that Defense Secretary Weinberger will win this one in the end.

The issue is clear: At a time of stupefying budget deficits, will Congress and voters stand still for major cuts in domestic programs while mountainous Pentagon spending goes on and on, held virtually sacred? President Reagan has called for 34 billion dollars of cuts in domestic programs. The Pentagon will end up with only 8.7 billion less than Weinberger proposed. Thus, the Pentagon budget would be left at 277.5 billion for the year starting next October, up by 19 billion over this year.

Secretary Weinberger's determination—some would call him unreasonably stubborn—not to chip in more to reduce the national deficit has aroused deep resentment not only among critics in Congress but among some of his colleagues in the cabinet and in the White House inner circle as well.

Still, he has the President behind him. And for the President and Congress alike, the issues are perplexing, for there is much to be said for both sides.

Providing for the security of the nation is any President's first and highest responsibility, one that Mr. Reagan takes seriously, aware of the danger of nuclear superiority posed by the Soviet Union. Many in Congress see it differently. They believe Weinberger has cast a spell over the President, because he himself has fallen under the influence of the generals and admirals around him.

Congress in coming months is determined to examine more closely Weinberger's strategic thinking and his overall stewardship of the nation's security. Many believe the Secretary can provide a better defense for less money.

Why, it will be asked, must the Pentagon's Star Wars concept be surrounded by so much confusion? Should or should not the U.S. be willing to offer a moratorium—or at least a slowdown—on its so-called Strategic Defense Initiative in space if the Kremlin cuts back on land-based warheads? This could offer the hope of saving tens of billions of dollars on an esoteric defense concept that many scientists say is futile anyway.

The defense chief will be asked why he refuses to be more selective about major weapons systems such as the MX missile or the B-1 bomber, in effect forcing Congress to try to devise a military strategy of its own. Many in Congress believe those two weapons will never earn their keep, and the MX, for that reason, is in deep trouble on Capitol Hill.

Congress is aware, as well, that taxpayers have lost confidence in the Pentagon's ability to control waste and abuse in buying weapons. The horror stories about overpriced spare parts flow without end—for example, the purchase of a 13-cent nut for \$2,043. Or consider helicopters that inexplicably fall out of the sky. Why not demand warranties from contractors that products will work as promised?

The questions are almost without end. Why does the U.S. spend 90 billion a year to maintain 350,000 troops and backups for Europe? Why, after all these years of heavy spending, is the readiness of conventional forces for sustained combat so uncertain? Why can't procurement be streamlined, better cost controls put in place?

We should not take the Soviet threat lightly. We must not disarm unilaterally. We should appreciate the Reagan strategy of using Star Wars, MX and other systems as bargaining chips in negotiations with the Soviets.

But enough is enough. The rate of spending can be slowed without jeopardizing national security. The "bargaining chip" philosophy has not worked in the past and is unlikely to do so in the future.

The budget that the President has sent to the Capitol will be rewritten this year, as well it should be. In the end, military spending must be measured against the nation's resources and its other priorities. We can't have it both ways.

Village Advertiser Commentary

Cuts in defense are as necessary as cuts in all other federal budgets (some of which have already been trimmed off fat while the grease still oozes and drips from Pentagon programs). Not only can we not have it both ways... we really don't want it both ways. Except in wartimes, America has never been a country where the military took precedence over the need of individual citizens. And that's how we want it.