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A CLOSER LOOK AT MILITARY SPENDING

For the first time in many years, Congress is beginning to examine the military budget in a comprehensive, systematic and critical way. And there is some speculation here that this new-found interest may be leading the Legislative Branch on a collision course with the Executive Branch -- though such a development is neither inevitable nor desirable.

For several reasons, therefore, this could become the most important "happening" in Washington this year. Here's why:

* The military budget, now in the neighborhood of \$80 billion a year, is the largest single item of Federal spending, accounting for approximately 50 percent of the total budget (even more if you add in the cost of past wars, including interest on the national debt, Veterans' benefits, etc.).

* Civilian control of the military -- one of the most fundamental and cherished elements of our Constitutional system -- is directly dependent upon rational control of military spending by Congress and the President.

* In the face of manifestly urgent domestic requirements -- safeguarding the environment, finding new job opportunities, rebuilding the cities, controlling crime and disorder, improving education, health, transportation, to name just a few -- an unnecessarily fat military budget deprives these other needs of essential resources and proportionately limits the ability of elected leaders to govern responsibly (i.e. to allocate limited resources according to a logical plan designed to accomplish priority objectives which will assure the national security and well-being).

TEMPTATION

* The combination of easy access to the U.S. Treasury and the absence of effective spending controls invariably produces at least two harmful effects: (1) a kind of looseness and inefficiency in conducting the public business, and (2) a self-perpetuating and self-justifying momentum, fueled by public funds, which constantly generates new projects and purposes -- a phenomenon which plagues military agencies just as readily as it does civilian agencies.

This is not a new situation, nor are these new facts or insights. It is simply that we have reached the point where the people will no longer allow the Congress to ignore the obvious. Growing dissatisfaction with the war in Vietnam has been a major factor behind the demand for a closer look at military spending. Steadily climbing prices, higher interest rates, the "squeeze" in credit, more and bigger taxes, and the threat to domestic happiness posed by unresolved disputes and unmet needs -- these have all contributed, for in each case the war and military spending have been seen as causes of the trouble.

But the catalyst which has brought these considerations together and sharpened public attention -- the flame which has ignited the fuel, in effect -- has been the series of recent revelations of Pentagon mismanagement: planes that won't work, tanks that mal-function, missiles which are obsolete before they're built, cancelled contracts, vast cost escalations and overruns. The names are all too familiar: the C5A jet transport, the TFX, the Cheyenne helicopter, the B-70 bomber, the Navajo, Skybolt, Snark and Bomarc missiles, to name a few. The list is discouragingly long. But the evidence is clear that much of the hundreds of billions of dollars we have spent on weapons systems in recent years has been counter-productive.

A LACK OF VIGILANCE

There may be almost as many reasons as there are critics: inadequate accounting and procurement procedures, ill-trained procurement officials, and reliance on the appearance rather than the reality of competition. Overriding all others, however, are two basic failures on which most critics agree: first, the failure to relate our military security objectives and military hardware and manpower more systematically to our overall national priorities; and second, the failure of Congress and the President to exercise the same degree of vigilance and scrutiny over the military budget that we insist on for non-defense spending.

In retrospect, the measure of our inattention has been astounding. Few, if any, critical witnesses have testified on budget matters before the committees responsible for authorizing and appropriating funds for the armed services, with any controversy pretty much limited to competition between the services for a bigger slice of the pie. Congressional debate on the military budget has seldom been other than superficial, with a total of two or three hours devoted to legislation costing \$25 - 30 billion, for example. And in the Administration, there has been no independent review of the military budget by the Bureau of the Budget, the President's right arm.

By way of contrast, the poverty program, costing less than two percent of the military program, receives far more detailed attention.

THE OBJECT IS QUALITY

To say all this is obviously not to downgrade the military, or to encourage unilateral disarmament, or to ignore the continued danger to the United States in a hostile world. It is just the reverse. Responsible critics of military spending have one primary objective, to strengthen our national security by seeing each element of it -- military and civilian -- in perspective, by assuring adequate resources for each, and by maximizing the return from our investments both in quantity and quality.

In this process, there can be no exemption from the insistence on quality performance, no "sacred cows," no untouchable programs. Each -- military and civilian -- must merit the money it seeks.

If the military budget is successfully to be brought out of the closet and into the full light of public debate and decision, if military and civilian programs are both to be properly balanced and adequately funded, we shall have to avoid what so often happens in the course of controversy. We can only suffer if we allow ourselves to be forced into one extreme or the other, to oppose all military requests as undesirable or to accept unquestioningly whatever the military proposes.

Both the President and responsible Congressional critics understand this danger, I believe. And so both must make a greater effort to keep the debate on a factual and constructive level, to recognize the good and honorable intentions of each, and to shape jointly a national policy which will serve the highest priority needs of all our people.