



America speaks out: Is the United States spending too much on defense?

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On 1-4 February 2007, the Gallup polling organization asked a representative sample of US citizens if they thought the United States was spending too little, too much, or just the right amount on defense and the military.^{1} For the first time since the mid-1990s, a plurality of Americans said that the country was spending too much. The surprising result of the survey shows current public attitudes to approximate those that prevailed in March 1993, shortly after former President Bill Clinton took office. Today, 43 percent of Americans say that the country is spending “too much” on the military, while 20 percent say “too little”. In 1993, the balance of opinion was 42 percent saying “too much” and 17 percent saying too little.

What makes this result especially surprising is that few leaders in Congress and no one in the administration today argues that the United States can or should reduce military spending. Quite the contrary: leaders of both parties seem eager to add to the Pentagon’s coffers, even as public anti-war sentiment builds. And Congress is not the only institution that appears insensitive to the shift in public opinion. The Gallup survey also drew little attention from the news media. Indeed, a *Lexis-Nexis* database search shows almost no coverage of the poll, which was released on 02 March 2007.

US military spending in comparative perspective

For FY 2008, the Bush administration has requested \$647.3 billion to cover the costs of national defense and war. This includes the Defense Department budget (\$483 billion), some smaller defense-related accounts (\$22.6 billion), and the projected FY 2008 cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and counter-terror operations (\$141.7 billion). However, it does not include non-DOD expenditures for homeland security (\$36.4 billion) or the Veterans’ Affairs budget (\$84.4 billion). Nor does it include the request for supplemental funds for outstanding FY 2007 war costs (\$93.4 billion).

The \$647.3 billion request represents a 75 percent real increase over the post-Cold War low-point in national defense spending, which occurred in 1996. Today’s expenditures are higher in inflation-adjusted terms than peak spending during the Vietnam and Korean wars – as well as higher than during the Reagan buildup.^{2}

One way of appreciating the significance of this change is to view it in terms of world military spending. Whereas the United States accounted for 28 percent of world defense expenditures in 1986 and 34 percent in 1994, it today accounts for approximately 50 percent.

The authoritative reference work on military comparisons, *The Military Balance 2007*, estimates world military expenditure in 2005 to have been approximately \$1.2 trillion. A plausible estimate for current world spending is \$1.35 trillion. By contrast, the armaments and disarmament yearbook of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimates 2005 world expenditure to have been slightly more than \$1 trillion. The estimates differ in large part because the two data books rely on different standards of comparison: *The Military Balance* relies more heavily on “purchasing power parity” (or *PPP*) when comparing nations’ expenditures, while the SIPRI volume uses exchange rates.^{3}

The change in America’s proportion of world military expenditure is due partly to the resurgence in US spending that began after 1998, and partly to reduced spending by other nations. Significantly, the greatest average decline in spending has occurred in that group of nations that the United States might consider “adversaries” or “potential adversaries”. China, for one, is spending much more than it did prior to 1990 – but “adversary spending” as a whole has receded substantially.

Spending versus strength

The turn in US public attitudes may reflect disenchantment with the Iraq war or a general sense that increased military spending is not bringing increased security. Clearly, the flood of defense dollars has not purchased stability in either Iraq or Afghanistan, nor has it led to a general decrease in terrorist activity. Indeed, the rate of terrorist incidents and fatalities has increased significantly since the onset of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars – even if one discounts terrorist activity occurring in these two countries.^{4}

Relevant to threat perception: the February 2007 Gallup poll shows that the proportion of Americans thinking that the country is “not strong enough” remains high: 46 percent. Only eight percent think the country is stronger than it needs to be. Comparable figures for 1993 are not available, but in 1990 public sentiments about spending and strength correlated much more closely. At that time 9 percent thought that the United States was spending too little and 16 percent thought it was spending too much. Regarding “strength”: 16 percent in 1990 thought the country was stronger than necessary, while 17 percent thought it was not as strong as it needed to be. In the recent poll, by contrast, the public leans toward seeing spending as too high and strength as too little.

Clearly (and understandably) the American public continues to perceive a high-level of threat, even as it has begun questioning the current level of military expenditure. The unusual disjuncture between sentiments about “defense spending” and “strength” may reflect doubts about how the Pentagon is spending its funds or doubts about whether military dollars can purchase the requisite type of strength. Certainly, the Iraq and Afghanistan imbroglios suggest that the utility of America’s military investments has distinct limits. This may create a basis of public support for political leaders attempting a more thorough security policy reform than they have been willing to contemplate so far.

Economic concerns

Economic concerns may also play a role in the public's thinking about defense spending. Although consumer confidence is higher in 2007 than it was in 2006, it still remains lower than during the mid- and late-1990s. In real terms, US median family income stagnated between 2000 and 2007, while personal debt rose. Now, rising interest rates are pinching the credit flow. Against this backdrop, the public may be taking a second look at the steep climb in military spending – up 45 percent in real terms between 2002 and 2008. Or perhaps the effect is more impressionistic: No matter how softly it is said, \$647 billion sounds like a vast sum.

Currently the Pentagon plans to spend more than \$2.75 trillion during the next five years – not counting the incremental cost of future combat operations. This is not easily reconciled with bringing the national debt under control, while also meeting pending demands on social security and medicare. There also may be detrimental macro-economic effects associated with the scale of federal deficits and debt – unless remedial action is taken. Concerns such as these recently led the World Economic Forum to lower America's competitiveness rating, dropping it from first place to sixth.^{5} Similar concerns have prompted the US Comptroller General and head of the Government Accountability Office, David M. Walker, to launch a public information campaign about the long-term threat to the nation's fiscal health. Such concerns may not yet figure substantially in the public's thinking about defense expenditures – but they are bound to play a bigger role as the “baby-boomer” generation begins to retire *en masse*.

Notes

1. Joseph Carroll, “Perceptions of “Too Much” Military Spending at 15-Year High,” *Gallup News Service*, 02 March 2007; <http://www.galluppoll.com/content/Default.aspx?ci=26761&pg=1&VERSION=p>
2. Steven M. Kosiak, *Both DOD Base and War Budgets Receive Big Boosts; Total Funding at Highest Level since the End of World War II* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 5 February 2007); http://www.csbaonline.org/4Publications/PubLibrary/U.20070205.Both_DoD_Base_and_/U.20070205.Both_DoD_Base_and_.pdf
3. *The Military Balance 2007* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2007); and, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2006: Armaments, Disarmament, and International Security* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2006)
4. Carl Conetta, *War & consequences: Global terrorism has increased since 9/11 attacks Project on Defense Alternatives Briefing Memo #38* (Cambridge MA: Commonwealth Institute, 25 September 2006); <http://www.comw.org/pda/fulltext/0609bm38.pdf>

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5. Philip Thornton, "US slides down competition league; Concern over America's growing twin deficits," *The Independent* (London), 27 September 2006;

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_20060927/ai_n16745860

6. Matt Crenson, "GAO Chief Warns Economic Disaster Looms," *Associated Press*, 28 October 2006;

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/28/AR2006102800420_pf.html