
Defense Report

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The Defense Budget Keeps Getting Bigger—Why Don't We Catch Up to the Soviets?

In a recent hearing on the Fiscal Year 1979 Defense Budget Representative George Mahon (D-Tex.), Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, chided Defense Department witnesses for making annual claims that the United States is not catching up to the Soviet Union in military preparedness. How could this be, Mahon asked, in view of increasing U.S. defense budgets over the past several years?

Secretary of Defense Harold Brown responded, "Yes, the United States is spending more but the Soviet Union is expanding its defense expenditures at an even greater rate." Secretary Brown also could have said that the USSR was so far ahead when we began to play "catch up" that we haven't been able to close the gap.

Any fault to be found in this situation cannot be laid solely at the feet of the President, the Congress, the Defense Department or the Joint Chiefs of Staff. After all, the decision to allot 37 percent of the total Federal Budget for cash payments to individuals for welfare, unemployment compensation, medical care, etc., and just 23 percent to national defense is based on a collective judgment of what is needed and what is attainable. At this point in time the Soviet threat is hypothetical while the challenges of unemployment, sickness and old age are with us every day. The Secretary of Defense defended his budget by saying that it is sensitive to ". . . the demands of domestic programs on the government's revenue."

Aside from an alarming continuation of the downward trend in military manpower, the U.S. Defense Budget for Fiscal Year 1979 is not a bad one. There is something in it for everybody. The Army is low man on the defense-spending totem pole as usual but it will still be able to start buying a badly-needed new tank and some vital air defense weapons. The Air Force will not get its B-1 bomber but it will get a variety of new tactical aircraft. The Navy gets a few new ships but does less-well than the other services, apparently making no progress toward a return to a 600-ship fleet that could match the capabilities of the new Soviet global navy. There are some other critical problems, too, like the lack of any real progress toward improving strategic airlift and sealift capabilities.

There is an exceeding fine line to be drawn between what is needed to keep the Nation socially vibrant and what must be done to protect it from exterior threats. Those who favor one priority over another must be prepared to compromise. In the end both sponsors may have to pull their belts in a notch or two.