
Defense Report

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Eighty Percent of the Army's Budget Pays for Turning on the Lights and Sounding Reveille

The Army's budget, like everyone else's, keeps getting bigger as inflation drives costs continually higher. In fiscal year 1979, the Army worked with a budget of \$35.8 billion. In the recently concluded 1980 fiscal year the Army's budget totaled \$36.3 billion and for 1981 the Army has asked for \$39.1 billion. That budget is still being thrashed around in Congress and it will probably turn out to be somewhat more than the Defense Department permitted the Army to request.

This is a lot of money and it must do a lot of things but, according to one authoritative Army source deeply involved in the budget process, "80 percent of the Army's budget goes for turning on the lights and sounding reveille." Of course, this is an exaggeration used to make the point that the cost of paying troops, feeding them, operating the bases and paying for utility services takes the lion's share of the money available in any given year. It means, obviously, that only about 20 percent of the budget can be used to buy new equipment and supplies, to maintain the equipment already on hand and to support training.

As disquieting as this may seem, we need only to look at our own household budgets to find a parallel. Before we can seriously consider buying a new car or television, make major repairs on the old ones or send the children to college, we have to pay the rent, buy the food and settle with the gas and electric companies. Only after those necessities are taken care of can we judge our ability to buy the "nice to have" things. And while a one-percent rise in the cost of living might cost a family a couple of hundred dollars in spendable income over a year, a single-percentage point increase in the rate of inflation costs the Army \$200 million.

As far as the Army is concerned, though, the things that are provided by the money left over after it pays for the basics are not "nice to have" but absolutely vital to the service's ability to contribute to national defense. The Army stands on the brink of a massive modernization program to make its tanks, armored personnel carriers, aircraft and other equipment at least equal in quality with those of the Soviet Army. The rate at which this modernization can be carried out is obviously linked to the amount of money that can be devoted to it. Over the course of recent years, the Army has not been able to fund fully its maintenance program so a large backlog of deferred work has built up and is not getting any smaller. It costs a lot of money to provide the facilities, fuel and ammunition for good training and there has never been a time in which training was more critical to the Army's ability to do its job.

There is no sign that the Army will get any larger so the part of the budget devoted to overhead should stay constant (adjusted for inflation, of course). What the Army desperately needs is more money for the other things. It is small wonder that the Army's leaders, having been told that the service's share of the overall defense budget next year and in several succeeding years will be smaller, are publicly expressing their alarm. Their sense of duty would permit nothing less.