
Defense Report

AUSA



What Comes First: A Defense Budget or a Strategy?

In the broadest terms, the armed forces of the United States exist for a single purpose, to act in support of our foreign policy. If our foreign policy dictates that U.S. interests will be actively defended wherever they are threatened, no matter how far those interests are extended beyond our borders, our forces must be organized and equipped to carry out that mission. If our elected leaders decide that our interests are best served by withdrawing into our own hemisphere or even behind our own borders, then our forces would take a different form.

This reasoning seems very straight forward and yet it is rarely followed in real life. The newly elected Carter Administration clung to the Democratic platform promise to cut between five and seven billion dollars from the defense budget until it came to grips with the real world and found the cuts were impossible. Departing Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, looking back on his own experience, admits this was not the right way to do it. But ". . . you don't have time to work out the world from its primordial atoms," he is quoted as saying. "You have to come up with the budget, as we did a month after we came into office."

There are a number of reasons for the budget taking the primal position in the business of running the government. First, according to long-standing procedure, just about everything the government does has to be reauthorized and appropriated for every year, even though it is understood that the program and its costs will have to be continued. Second, our government has become so large and so complex that the annual budget cycle must start early in the year or it cannot be completed by the start of the next spending year — and more often than not isn't completed anyway. Third, for at least the past ten years the Office of Management and Budget, not the Cabinet officers and the President have set national security policies by allocating dollars without regard to foreign policy.

According to practice, the Carter Administration will submit one last budget to the Congress in January, just before it passes into extinction. The incoming Reagan Administration will then submit its proposed changes — not a whole new budget — a few weeks after it takes office. "Logically, you ought to do it the other way around," Secretary Brown acknowledges, "starting with what's necessary for U.S. security, the international factors, your strategy, what forces it takes and then determine the budget to support them."

In its campaign rhetoric the Reagan Administration seemed to recognize many of the shortcomings of our present defense establishment, vis-a-vis the realities the United States faces in the world today — our problems with manning the forces, our inability to rapidly deploy those forces and support them properly, our shrinking naval capability and the unfavorable shift in the strategic nuclear balance. We can only hope that the campaign rhetoric is now being converted to concrete plans and that, for the first time in many years, something other than pure budget considerations will drive our defense programs.