
Defense Report

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A Major Military Problem—How to Get Better Equipment Faster and Cheaper

For the taxpaying public, military procurement has a bad reputation for costing too much, taking too long to deliver and sometimes producing equipment plagued by problems. The blame for this poor public image can rarely be put on a single individual or agency but must be shared by the White House, Congress, the Pentagon and U.S. Industry.

Because the services know they will have to keep a generation of weapons in their inventories for a long time, they tend to press forward into fields of rapidly changing technology in the hope that the final product will represent the ultimate state of the art. Often, the art itself is not properly formed and the product is troublesome. Budgeteers at all levels tend to make overly optimistic estimates of costs that may very well result in that military boogeyman "cost overrun." As problems have arisen, Congress has injected itself more and more deeply into the acquisition process, often tending to confuse and delay it even further. Unquestionably, there has been a degree of rivalry among and within the services that has sometimes made it difficult to decide which developments should proceed.

None of this is big news. The problem has existed for years but now the Reagan Administration says it is going to do something about it. In a recent memorandum to the services and the responsible Department of Defense staff, Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger announced a program to streamline the acquisition process, to reduce costs and to shorten the time between conception and delivery. The memo calls on the services to do many things, such as improving long-range planning, using evolutionary alternatives that don't press the state of the art too far and budgeting realistically. Perhaps most importantly it calls for production to be carried out at higher, more economical rates and to be planned on a multi-year basis.

This is a laudable course, but it will take the long-term cooperation of all the parties involved to make it work. Only Congress, for example, has the authority to set efficient production rates and to fund multi-year procurement plans. Firm adherence to Secretary Weinberger's plan will go a long way toward improving the efficiency and the image of the military procurement program.