
Defense Report

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The Chimera of a Four-Percent Limit on Defense Spending Growth—It Just Won't Work

There is a move afoot in Congress to limit the real growth of the outlays planned for the fiscal year 1984 defense budget to just four percent. This is enough growth, its proponents say, to keep the Defense Department on the right path toward preparedness without drawing too much money away from the rest of the federal budget. Had they studied this notion closely they would realize it is little more than a flight of fancy.

What is overlooked is the fact that the largest portion of the defense budget is made up of fixed costs associated with prior-year programs, needed to pay military and civilian personnel or required to keep installations running. The Army's budget, for example, contains just \$5 billion, or less than eight percent of its total, for what would be called "new investment." If the four-percent limit on growth were applied evenly to all the services, it would mean the Army would have to either decimate the modernization program it has just begun or strip the funds from readiness accounts, thereby diminishing our ability to respond effectively to military emergencies.

In testimony before Congress, Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh Jr. has already indicated that the impact of such a cut will have to be apportioned among every element of the Army's budget. Training will have to be curtailed, maintenance will have to be deferred—with a resulting backlog that would take years to overcome—at least one major system in the modernization program will have to be abandoned and others will have to be slowed. The Army's force structure will undoubtedly shrink, Mr. Marsh said, with accompanying base closures.

The choices for the Army's leadership and for Congress will be tough ones. Within the parameters of whatever budget finally emerges, the Army must somehow preserve its ability to fight wherever it is sent. Congress must balance its desire to have more money available for social programs against the very real threats we face all over the world. Our survival is truly at risk.