
Defense Report

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The Two-Year Defense Budget—A Step in the Right Direction

In 1974 Congress passed a law that was supposed to improve the way it legislates appropriations to run the government, but so far, they have never been able to pass a defense budget on time. Instead the Defense Department has been forced to start each new fiscal year operating under Congress' time-honored loophole called a "continuing resolution." Doing business in such a slipshod manner has had a lasting impact on our ability to defend our national interests.

Now, prodded by the Grace and Packard Commissions, our slow-moving Congress has finally accepted a better way to get the job done. In the fiscal 1986 Authorization Act, the legislators directed the Defense Department to submit biannual budget requests beginning with fiscal years 1988 and 1989.

The move to require two-year budgets from Defense should go far toward improving Congress' ability to effectively oversee defense programs and should greatly improve the military services' execution of those programs. Two year budgets are expected to offer major advantages in military procurement savings and stability. In the event there develops the ancillary benefit of a reduction in the volume of Congressional reporting requirements, that, too, would be considered a vast improvement over the way things are now being done.

On the down side, the law does not specify that appropriations be made for two years—only that the Defense Department must submit a two-year budget. Then, too, there's no guarantee that the age-old running battle between authorizing and appropriating committees will yield better results in a biannual budget than we have experienced in the past.

So the future of this program lies in the manner in which it is implemented. The Defense Department is preparing its request as directed. The President will send his request to Congress early next year. From then on, the whole matter rests in the hands of Congress, where it is hoped the authorizing and appropriating committees and subcommittees will declare a cease-fire in their private turf battle and will all get on with the job of providing more effectively for our common defense.