
Defense Report

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Defense and Deficit Reduction—A Time for Hard Choices

Nearly everyone even remotely connected with the federal government is now feeling the same pressure to deal with the deficit that has confronted Congress for many months. Too many, in government and out, insist that massive cuts to Defense programs are the only solution to our deficit problems. They fail to recognize that the effort to balance revenue and government spending has driven Congress to cut progressively deeper into the resources allocated to the defense needs of the United States with little regard for national security priorities or strategy.

Actually the budget of the Department of Defense has been a continual contributor to deficit reduction exercises, and these have often been the only real reductions in spending the whole government budget process has sustained. For example, defense outlays were reduced from the President's budget estimate by \$10 billion in fiscal 1984, \$19 billion in 1985 and \$43 billion in 1986.

To illustrate how the refusal to address defense priorities and deal only with the fiscal topline makes a travesty of the whole budget process, consider congressional actions on President Reagan's defense request for FY 1986. After many months of haggling, the Senate and House Armed Services Committees reduced the President's request by \$19.2 billion, a program that reflected congressional priorities and was then agreed to by the President.

The problem is that the budget enacted in the Continuing Resolution for 1986 was \$5 billion lower. Then came the Gramm-Rudman amendment and another \$11 billion reduction.

As enacted, the 1986 defense bill provided not the zero-growth allocation which Congress and President Reagan had endorsed only three months earlier but, instead, a 6.2 percent decline—the first time in 15 years that there has been an absolute decline to the defense budget below the previous year.

Failure by Congress to consider the major reductions already made in defense programs results in using the defense budget as the balance wheel of fiscal policy—a practice which gave us the "hollow army" of the 1970s.