

Fueling the Warfare State. America's \$1.4 Trillion "National Security" Budget Makes Us Ever Less Safe

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This March, when the Biden administration presented a staggering [\\$813 billion](#) proposal for "national defense," it was hard to imagine a budget that could go significantly higher or be more generous to the denizens of the military-industrial complex. After all, that request represented [far more](#) than peak spending in the Korean or Vietnam War years, and well over \$100 billion more than at the height of the Cold War.

It was, in fact, an astonishing figure by any measure — [more than](#) two-and-a-half times what China spends; [more](#), in fact, than (and hold your hats for this one!) the national security budgets of the next nine countries, including China and Russia, combined. And yet the weapons industry and hawks in Congress are now demanding that even *more* be spent.

In recent National Defense Authorization Act proposals, which always set a marker for what Congress is willing to fork over to the Pentagon, the Senate and House Armed Services Committees both voted to increase the 2023 budget yet again — by [\\$45 billion](#) in the case of the Senate and [\\$37 billion](#) for the House. The final figure won't be determined until later this year, but Congress is likely to add tens of billions of dollars more than even the Biden administration wanted to what will most likely be a record for the Pentagon's already bloated budget.

This lust for yet more weapons spending is especially misguided at a time when a never-ending pandemic, growing heat waves and other depredations of climate change, and racial and economic injustice are devastating the lives of millions of Americans. Make no mistake about it: the greatest risks to our safety and our future are non-military in nature, with the exception, of course, of the threat of nuclear war, which could increase if the current budget goes through as planned.

But as *TomDispatch* readers know, the Pentagon is just one element in an ever more costly

American national security state. Adding other military, intelligence, and internal-security expenditures to the Pentagon's budget brings the total upcoming "national security" budget to a mind-boggling \$1.4 trillion. And note that, in June 2021, the last time my colleague Mandy Smithberger and I added up such costs to the taxpayer, that figure was [almost \\$1.3 trillion](#), so the trend is obvious.

To understand how these vast sums are spent year after year, let's take a quick tour of America's national security budget, top to bottom.

The Pentagon's "Base" Budget

The Pentagon's proposed "base" budget, which includes all of its routine expenses from personnel to weapons to the costs of operating and maintaining a [1.3 million](#) member military force, came in at [\\$773 billion](#) for 2023, more than [\\$30 billion above](#) that of 2022. Such an increase alone is three times the [discretionary budget](#) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and more than [three times](#) the total allocation for the Environmental Protection Agency.

In all, the Pentagon consumes [nearly half](#) of the discretionary budget of the whole federal government, a figure that's come down slightly in recent years thanks to the Biden administration's increased investment in civilian activities. That still means, however, that almost anything the government wants to do other than preparing for or waging war involves a scramble for funding, while the Department of Defense gets virtually unlimited financial support.

And keep in mind that the proposed Biden increase in Pentagon spending comes despite the ending of 20 years of U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan, a move that should have meant significant reductions in the department's budget. Perhaps you won't be surprised to learn, however, that, in the wake of the Afghan disaster, the military establishment and hawks in Congress quickly shifted gears to touting — and exaggerating — challenges posed by [China](#), [Russia](#), and [inflation](#) as reasons for absorbing the potential savings from the Afghan War and pressing the Pentagon budget ever higher.

It's worth looking at what America stands to receive for its \$773 billion — or about \$2,000 per taxpayer, according to an [analysis](#) by the National Priorities Project at the Institute for Policy Studies. [More than half](#) of that amount goes to giant weapons contractors like Raytheon and Lockheed Martin, along with thousands of smaller arms-making firms.

The most concerning part of the new budget proposal, however, may be the administration's support for a three-decades long, [\\$1.7-trillion](#) plan to build a new generation of nuclear-armed missiles (as well, of course, as new warheads to go with them), bombers, and submarines. As the organization Global Zero has [pointed out](#), the United States could dissuade any country from launching an atomic attack against it with far fewer weapons than are contained in its current nuclear arsenal. There's simply no need for a costly — and risky — nuclear weapons "modernization" plan. Sadly, it's guaranteed to help fuel a continuing global nuclear arms race, while entrenching nuclear weapons as a mainstay of national security policy for decades to come. (Wouldn't those decades be so much better spent working to [eliminate](#) nuclear weapons altogether?)



The riskiest weapon in that nuclear plan is a new land-based, intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). As former Secretary of Defense **William Perry** [once explained](#), ICBMs are among “the most dangerous weapons in the world” because a president warned of a nuclear attack would have only a matter of minutes to decide whether to launch them, increasing the risk of an accidental nuclear war based on a false alarm. Not only is a new ICBM unnecessary, but the existing ones should be retired as well, as a way of reducing the potential for a world-ending nuclear conflagration.

To its credit, the Biden administration is trying to get rid of an ill-conceived nuclear weapons program initiated during the Trump years – a [sea-launched, nuclear-armed cruise missile](#) that, rather than adding a “deterrent” capability, would raise the risk of a nuclear confrontation. As expected, [nuclear hawks](#) in the military and Congress are trying to restore funding for that nuclear SLCM (pronounced “Slick ‘em”).

The Pentagon budget is replete with other unnecessary, overpriced, and often potentially dysfunctional systems that should either be canceled or replaced with more affordable and effective alternatives. The most obvious case in point is the F-35 combat aircraft, meant to carry out multiple missions for the Air Force, Navy, and Marines. So far, it does [none of them well](#).

In a series of careful analyses of the aircraft, the Project on Government Oversight [determined](#) that it may never be fully ready for combat. As for cost, at an estimated [\\$1.7 trillion](#) over its projected period of service, it’s already the most expensive single weapons program ever undertaken by the Pentagon. And keep in mind that those costs will only increase as the military services are forced to pay to fix [problems](#) that were never addressed in the rush to deploy the plane before it was fully tested. Meanwhile, that aircraft is so complex that, at any given moment, a large percentage of the fleet is [down for maintenance](#), meaning that, if ever called on for combat duty, many of those planes will simply not be available.

In a grudging acknowledgement of the multiple problems plaguing the F-35, the Biden administration proposed decreasing its buy of the plane by about [a third](#) in 2023, a figure that should have been much lower given its poor performance. But congressional advocates of the plane — including a large [F-35 caucus](#) made up of members in states or districts where parts of it are being produced — will undoubtedly continue to press for more planes than even the Pentagon’s asking for, as the Senate Armed Services Committee [did](#) in its markup of the Department of Defense spending bill.

In addition to all of this, the Pentagon’s base budget includes mandatory spending for items like military retirement, totaling an estimated \$12.8 billion for 2023.

Running national (in)security tally: \$785.8 billion

The Nuclear Budget

The average taxpayer no doubt assumes that a government agency called the Department of Energy (DOE) would be primarily concerned with developing new sources of energy, including ones that would reduce America's dependence on fossil fuels to help rein in the ravages of climate change. Unfortunately, that assumption couldn't be less true.

Instead of spending the bulk of its time and money on energy research and development, [more than 40%](#) of the Department of Energy's budget for 2023 is slated to support the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), which manages the country's nuclear weapons program, principally by maintaining and developing nuclear warheads. Work on other military activities like reactors for nuclear submarines pushes the defense share of the DOE budget even higher. The NNSA spreads its work across the country, with major locations in California, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. Its proposed 2023 budget for nuclear-weapons activities is [\\$16.5 billion](#), part of a budget for defense-related projects of [\\$29.8 billion](#).

Amazingly the NNSA's record of managing its programs may be even worse than the Pentagon's, with cost overruns of [more than \\$28 billion](#) during the last two decades. Many of its current projects, like a [plan](#) to build a new facility to produce plutonium "pits" — the devices that trigger the explosion of a hydrogen bomb — are unnecessary even under the current, misguided nuclear weapons modernization plan.

Nuclear budget: \$29.8 billion

Running (in)security tally: \$815.6 billion

Defense-Related Activities

This catch-all category, pegged at [\\$10.6 billion](#) in 2023, includes the international activities of the FBI and payments to Central Intelligence Agency retirement funds, among other things.

Defense-Related Activities: \$10.6 billion

Running (in)security tally: \$826.2 billion

The Intelligence Budget

Information about this country's [18 separate intelligence agencies](#) is largely shielded from public view. Most members of Congress don't even have staff that can access significant details on how intelligence funds are spent, making meaningful Congressional oversight almost impossible. The only real data supplied with regard to the intelligence agencies is a top-line number - [\\$67.1 billion](#) proposed for 2023, a \$5 billion increase over 2022. Most of the intelligence community's budget is believed to be hidden [inside the Pentagon budget](#). So, in the interests of making a conservative estimate, intelligence spending is not included in our tally.

Intelligence Budget: \$67.1 billion

Running (in)security tally: \$826.2 billion

Veterans Affairs Budget

America's post-9/11 wars have generated [millions](#) of veterans, many of whom have returned from battle with severe physical or psychological injuries. As a result, spending on veterans' affairs has soared, reaching a proposed [\\$301 billion](#) in the 2023 budget plan. Research conducted for the Costs of War Project at Brown University has determined that these costs will only grow, with [more than \\$2 trillion](#) needed just to take care of the veterans of the post-9/11 conflicts.

Veterans Affairs Budget: \$301 billion

Running (in)security tally: \$1.127 trillion

International Affairs Budget

The International Affairs budget includes non-military items like diplomacy at the State Department and economic aid through the Agency for International Development, critical (but significantly underfunded) parts of the U.S. national security strategy writ large. But even in this category there are significant military-related activities in the form of programs that provide arms and training to foreign militaries and police forces. It's proposed that the largest of these, the Foreign Military Financing program, should receive [\\$6 billion](#) in 2023. Meanwhile, the total requested International Affairs budget is [\\$67.8 billion](#) in 2023.

International Affairs Budget: \$67.8 billion

Running (in)security tally: \$1.195 trillion

The Homeland Security Budget

After the 9/11 attacks, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was established by combining a wide range of agencies, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Transportation Security Agency, the U.S. Secret Service, Customs and Border Protection, and the Coast Guard. The proposed DHS budget for 2023 is [\\$56.7 billion](#), more than one-quarter of which goes to Customs and Border Protection as part of a militarized approach to addressing immigration into the United States.

Homeland Security Budget: \$56.7 billion

Running (in)security tally: \$1.252 trillion

Interest on the Debt

The national security state, as outlined so far, is [responsible for](#) about 26% of the interest due on the U.S. debt, a total of \$152 billion.

Interest on the Debt: \$152 billion

Running (in)security tally: \$1.404 trillion

Our Misguided Security Budget

Spending \$1.4 trillion to address a narrowly defined concept of national security should be considered budgetary malpractice on a scale so grand as to be almost unimaginable — especially at a time when the greatest risks to the safety of Americans and the rest of the world are not military in nature. After all, the Covid pandemic has already taken the lives of [more than one million](#) Americans, while the fires, floods, and heat waves caused by climate change have impacted [tens of millions](#) more.

Yet the administration’s proposed allocation of [\\$45 billion](#) to address climate change in the 2023 budget would be less than 6% of the Pentagon’s proposed budget of \$773 billion. And as noted, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are slated to get just one-third of the proposed increase in Pentagon spending between 2022 and 2023. Worse yet, attempts to raise spending significantly to address these urgent challenges, from President Biden’s Build Back Better plan to the Green New Deal, are stalled in Congress.

In a world where such dangers are only increasing, perhaps the best hope for launching a process that could, sooner or later, reverse such perverse priorities lies with grassroots organizing. Consider, for instance the “[moral budget](#)” crafted by the [Poor People’s Campaign](#), which would cut Pentagon spending almost in half while refocusing on programs aimed at eliminating poverty, protecting the environment, and improving access to health care. If even part of such an agenda were achieved and the “defense” budget reined in, if not cut drastically, America and the world would be far safer places.

Given the scale of the actual security problems we face, it’s time to think big when it comes to potential solutions, while recognizing what Martin Luther King, Jr., once [described](#) as the “fierce urgency of now.” Time is running short, and concerted action is imperative.

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