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What Price “Defense”?

America’s Nearly \$1.3 Trillion National Security Budget Isn’t Making Us Any Safer

BY MANDY SMITHBERGER
& WILLIAM HARTUNG

This piece originally appeared on TomDispatch.

President Biden’s first Pentagon budget, released late last month, is staggering by any reasonable standard. At more than \$750 billion for the Defense Department and related work on nuclear weapons at the Department of Energy, it represents one of the highest levels of spending since World War II—far higher than the peaks of the Korean or Vietnam wars or President Ronald Reagan’s military buildup

of the 1980s, and roughly three times what China spends on its military.

Developments of the past year and a half—an ongoing pandemic, an intensifying mega-drought, white supremacy activities, and racial and economic injustice among them—should have underscored that the greatest threats to American lives are anything but military in nature. But no matter, the Biden administration has decided to double down on military spending as the primary pillar of what still passes for American security policy. And don’t be fooled by that striking Pentagon budget figure either. This year’s funding requests suggest that the total

national security budget will come closer to a breathtaking \$1.3 trillion.

That mind-boggling figure underscores just how misguided Washington’s current “security”—a word that should increasingly be put in quotation marks—policies really are. No less concerning was the new administration’s decision to go full-speed ahead on longstanding Pentagon plans to build a new generation of nuclear-armed bombers, submarines, and missiles, including, of course, new nuclear warheads to go with them, at a cost of at least \$1.7 trillion over the next three decades.

The Trump administration added to

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that plan projects like a new submarine-launched, nuclear-armed cruise missile, all of which is fully funded in Biden's first budget. It hardly matters that a far smaller arsenal would be more than adequate to dissuade any country from launching a nuclear attack on the United States or its allies. A rare glimmer of hope came in a recent internal memo from the Navy suggesting that it may ultimately scrap Trump's sea-launched cruise

response represents both bad strategy and bad budgeting. If, sooner or later, cooler heads don't prevail, the obsession with China that's gripped the White House, the Pentagon, and key members of Congress could keep Pentagon budgets high for decades to come.

In reality, the principal challenges posed by China are diplomatic and economic, not military, and seeking militarized answers to them will only spark a new Cold War and a

Biden's first budget is a major win for key players in the nuclear-industrial complex.

missile in next year's budget submission—but that proposal is already facing intense pushback from nuclear-weapons boosters in Congress.

In all, Biden's first budget is a major win for key players in the nuclear-industrial complex like Northrop Grumman, the prime contractor on the new nuclear bomber and a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM); General Dynamics, the maker of the new ballistic-missile submarine; Lockheed Martin, which produces sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs); and firms like Honeywell that oversee key elements in the Department of Energy's nuclear-warhead complex.

The Biden budget does retire some older-generation weapons. The only reason, however, is to fund even more expensive new systems like hypersonic weapons and ones embedded with artificial intelligence, all with the goal of supposedly putting the United States in a position to win a war with China (if anyone could "win" such a war).

China's military buildup remains, in fact, largely defensive, so ramping up Pentagon spending supposedly in

risky arms race that could make a superpower nuclear conflict more likely. While there's much to criticize in China's policies, from its crack-down on the democracy movement in Hong Kong to its ethnic cleansing and severe repression of its Uyghur population, in basic military capabilities, it doesn't come faintly close to the United States, nor will it any time soon. Washington's military build-up, however, could undermine the biggest opportunity in U.S.-China relations: finding a way to cooperate on issues like climate change that threaten the future of the planet.

As noted, the three-quarters of a trillion dollars the United States spends on the Pentagon budget is just a portion of a much larger figure for the full range of activities of the national security state. Let's look, category by category, at what the Biden budget proposes to spend on this broader set of activities.

THE PENTAGON'S "BASE BUDGET"

The Pentagon's proposed "base" budget, which, in past years, has included

routine spending for fighting ongoing conflicts, was \$715 billion for fiscal year (FY) 2022, \$10 billion more than last year's request. Despite complaints to the contrary by advocates of even higher Pentagon spending, that represents no small addition. It's larger, for instance, than the entire budget of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. No question about it, the Pentagon remains by a long shot the agency with the largest discretionary budget.

One piece of good news is that this year's request marks the end of the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) account. That slush fund was used to finance the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also included tens of billions of dollars for pet Pentagon projects that had nothing to do with current conflicts.

While off-budget emergency spending has typically only been used in the initial years of a conflict, OCO became a tool to evade caps on the Pentagon's regular budget imposed by the Budget Control Act of 2011. That legislation has now expired and the Biden administration has heeded the advice of good-government and taxpayer-advocacy groups by eliminating the slush fund entirely.

Unfortunately, its latest budget request still includes \$42.1 billion for direct and indirect war-spending costs, which means that, OCO or not, there will be no net reduction in spending. Still, the end of that fund marks a small but potentially significant step towards greater accountability and transparency in the Pentagon budget. Moreover, congressional leaders are urging the Biden administration to seize savings from the ongoing Afghan withdrawal to sooner or later reduce the Pentagon's top line.

As for what's in the base budget, there are a number of particularly troubling proposed expenditures that warrant attention and congressional pushback. Spending on the Pentagon's new Intercontinental Ballistic Missile—known formally as the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent—has nearly doubled in the new proposal from \$1.4 billion to \$2.6 billion.

This may seem like small change in such a budget, but it's just a down payment on a system that could, in the end, cost more than \$100 billion to procure and another \$164 billion to operate over its lifetime. More importantly, as former secretary of defense William Perry noted, ICBMs are "some of the most dangerous weapons in the world" because a president would have only a matter of minutes to decide whether to launch them upon a warning of an attack, greatly increasing the risk of an accidental nuclear war based on a false alarm. In short, the new ICBM is not just costly but exceedingly dangerous for the health of humanity. The Biden budget should have eliminated it, not provided more funding for it.

Another eye-opener is the decision to spend more than \$12 billion on the F-35 combat aircraft, a troubled, immensely expensive weapons system whose technical flaws suggest that it may never be fully ready for combat. Such knowledge should, of course, have resulted in a decision to at least pause production on the plane until testing is complete. House Armed Services Committee chair Adam Smith (D-WA) has stated that he's tired of pouring money down the F-35 "rathole," while the Air Force's top officer, General Charles Brown, has compared it to a Ferrari that "you don't drive to work every day" but "only drive it out on Sundays."

Consider that an embarrassing admission for a plane once publicized as a future low-cost bulwark for the U.S. combat aircraft fleet. Whether the Air Force, Navy, and Marines, the three services that utilize variants of the F-35, will stay the course and buy more than 2,400 of these aircraft remains to be seen. Count on one thing, though: the F-35 lobby, including a special F-35 caucus in the House of Representatives and the Machinists Union, whose workers build the planes, will fight tooth and nail to keep the program fully funded regardless of whether or not it serves our national security needs.

And keep in mind that the F-35 is only one of many legacies of failed Pentagon modernization efforts. Even if the Pentagon were to acquire its new systems without delays or cost overruns—something rare indeed—its expensive spending plans have already earned this decade the moniker of the "terrible twenties."

Worse yet, there's a distinct possibility that Congress will push that budget even higher in response to "wish lists" being circulated by each of the military services. Items on them that have yet to make it into the Biden Pentagon budget include things like—surprise!—more F-35s. The Army's wish list even includes systems it claimed it needed to cut. That the services are even allowed to make such requests to Congress is symbolic of a breakdown in budgetary discipline of the highest order.

The base budget also includes mandatory spending for items like military retirement. This year's request adds \$12.8 billion to the Pentagon's tab.

Running Tally: \$727.9 billion

THE NUCLEAR BUDGET: \$29.9 billion

It would be reasonable for you to

assume that the Department of Energy's budget would primarily be devoted to developing new energy sources and combating climate change, but that assumption would, sadly enough, be wildly off the mark.

In fact, more than half of the department's budget goes to support the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), which manages the country's nuclear weapons program. The NNSA does work on nuclear warheads at eight major locations—California, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico (two facilities), South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas—across the country, along with subsidiary facilities in several additional states. NNSA's proposed FY 2022 budget for nuclear-weapons activities is \$15.5 billion, part of a budget for atomic-energy-related projects of \$29.9 billion.

The NNSA is notorious for poor management of major projects. It has routinely been behind schedule and over cost—to the tune of \$28 billion in the past two decades. Its future plans seem destined to hit the pocketbook of the American taxpayer significantly, with projected long-term spending on nuclear weapons activities rising by a proposed \$113 billion in a single year.
Running tally: \$757.8 billion

DEFENSE-RELATED ACTIVITIES: \$10.5 billion

This is a catch-all category, totaling \$10.5 billion in the FY 2022 request, including the international activities of the FBI and payments to the CIA retirement fund, among other things.
Running tally: \$768.3 billion

THE INTELLIGENCE BUDGET: \$62.3 billion

There is very little public information available about how the nation's—

count 'em!—17 intelligence agencies spend our tax dollars. The majority of congressional representatives don't even have staff members capable of accessing any kind of significant information on intelligence spending, a huge obstacle to the ability of Congress to oversee these agencies and their activities in any meaningful way.

Over 2.7 million U.S. military personnel have cycled through war zones in this century.

So far this year there is only a top-line figure available for spending on national (but not military) intelligence activities of \$62.3 billion. Most of this money is already believed to be hidden away in the Pentagon budget, so it's not added to the running tally displayed below.

Running tally: \$768.3 billion

THE MILITARY AND DEFENSE DEPARTMENT RETIREMENT AND HEALTH BUDGET: \$9.7 billion

The Treasury Department covers military retirement and health expenditures that should be in the Pentagon's base budget. Net spending on these two items—minus interest earned and payments into the two accounts—was a negative \$9.7 billion in FY 2022.

Running tally: \$758.6 billion

VETERANS AFFAIRS BUDGET: \$284 billion

The full costs of war go far beyond the expenditures contained in the Pentagon budget, including the costs of taking care of the veterans of America's "forever wars." Over 2.7 million U.S. military personnel have cycled through war zones in this century and hundreds of thousands of them have

suffered severe physical or psychological injuries, ratcheting up the costs of veterans' care accordingly. In addition, as we emerge from the Covid-19 disaster months, the Veterans Affairs Department anticipates a "bow wave" of extra costs and demands for its services from veterans who deferred care during the worst of the pandemic. The

total FY2022 budget request for Veterans Affairs is \$284.5 billion.

Running tally: \$1,043.1 billion

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS BUDGET: \$79 billion

The International Affairs budget includes funding for the State Department and the Agency for International Development, integral parts of the U.S. national security strategy. Here, investments in diplomacy and economic and health activities overseas are supplemented by about \$5.6 billion in military aid to other countries. The Biden administration has proposed overall International Affairs funding for FY 2022 at \$79 billion.

Running tally: \$1,122.1 billion

THE HOMELAND SECURITY BUDGET: \$52.2 billion

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created by throwing together 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 FY2022 is \$52.2 bil-

lion, nearly one-third of which goes to Customs and Border Protection.

Running tally: \$1,174.3 billion

INTEREST ON THE DEBT: \$93.8 billion

The national security state, as outlined above, is responsible for about 20% of the interest due on the U.S. debt, a total of more than \$93.8 billion.

Final tally: \$1,268.1 billion

ARE YOU FEELING SAFER NOW?

Theoretically, that nearly \$1.3 trillion to be spent on national security writ large is supposed to be devoted to activities that make America and the world a safer place. That's visibly not the case when it comes to so many of the funds that will be expended in the name of national security—from taxpayer dollars thrown away on weapons systems that don't work to those spent on an unnecessary and danger-

ous new generation of nuclear weapons, to continuing to reinforce and extend the historically unprecedented U.S. military presence on this planet by maintaining more than 800 overseas military bases around the world.

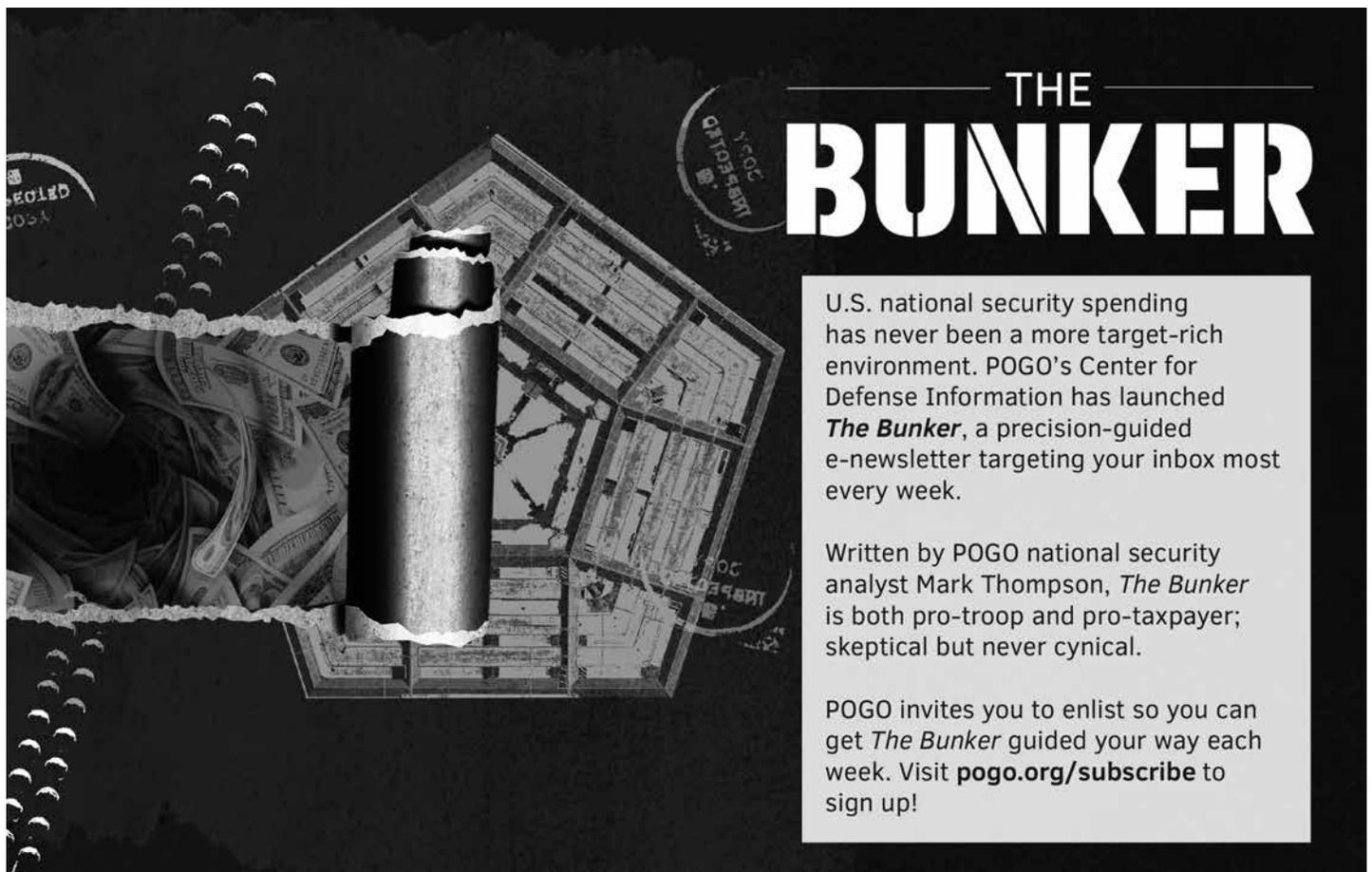
If managed properly, President Biden's initiatives on rebuilding domestic infrastructure and combating climate change would be far more central to keeping people safe than throwing more money at the Pentagon and related agencies. Unfortunately, unlike the proposed Pentagon budget, significant Green New Deal-style infrastructure funding is far less likely to be passed by a bitterly divided Congress. Washington evidently doesn't care that such investments would also be significantly more effective job creators.

A shift in spending toward these and other urgent priorities like addressing the possibility of future

pandemics would clearly be a far better investment in "national security" than the present proposed Pentagon budget. Sadly, though, too many of America's political leaders have clearly drawn the wrong lessons from the pandemic. If this country continues to squander staggering sums on narrowly focused national-security activities at a time when our greatest challenges are anything but military in nature, this country (and the world) will be a far less safe place in the future. ■

This piece was first published in June 2021. The original and its sources can be found at pogo.org/what-price-defense.

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What Congress Needs to Do to Get the F-35 Program on Track

PHOTO: GEORGE FREY / STRINGER VIA GETTY IMAGES NEWS)

BY DAN GRAZIER

The Pentagon launched the F-35 project in 2001 to be the low-cost everyday aircraft to perform multiple missions for the Air Force, Marine Corps, and the Navy. Over the span of 20 years, the F-35's role changed to that of a command-and-control platform for more reliable aircraft. The United States has spent more than \$177.6 billion so far on the F-35 program with at least \$283.4 billion more needed for future research and development, military construction, and production. It will take another \$1.3 trillion just to operate the F-35 over the expected 60 year life of the program.

THE SOLUTION

To protect against further wasted money now, the Project On Government Oversight recommends that Congress suspend all future F-35 procurement appropriations unless the following occurs:

The Director, Operational Test & Evaluation declares that each F-35 variant—A, B and C—is fully combat effective

and fully suitable for use in the hands of operational pilots and maintainers. Until this happens the services will continue to spend taxpayer dollars buying flawed aircraft that will not perform properly in the air when they can fly and be significant maintenance burdens while on the ground. The testing office's finding must be detailed, as required by law, in a public "Beyond Low-Rate Initial Production Report" to Congress. The report should detail the F-35's demonstrated ability in realistic field conditions to generate at least one and a half sortie for least 30 days in sustained combat.

All F-35 variants have each reliably demonstrated superiority in air-to-air and air-to-ground mission exercises over the F-16, F/A-18, and A-10. Retiring these platforms without an effective replacement will endanger national security by leaving the services without the capabilities they need.

The Government Accountability Office conducts and reports in writing to Congress an analysis of the above F-35 reports to confirm that they are complete and accurate.

MORE POTENTIAL COSTS

Despite the massive amount of money spent buying F-35s, the services are still getting an unfinished product. Additional funds are now being spent to fix design flaws and to complete development work on F-35s purchased before the completion of development and testing. Buying more F-35s now will complicate matters further. The services already struggle to support the aircraft they have now because the maintenance depots can't keep up with the volume of work. The GAO found that major F-35 repairs took twice as long to complete than the program needs because the aircraft break down more than anticipated and the depot capacity has not grown to meet the unexpected demand. This issue received bipartisan scrutiny during an April 2021 hearing. Support responsible government, a strong national defense, and a reduction in wasted taxpayer dollars by requiring more accountability and transparency in the F35 program. ■

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The Key Reason the U.S. Lost in Afghanistan

Pakistan: 1, U.S.: 0

After 9/11, the most shocking day of the nearly 20-year-long war in Afghanistan was May 2, 2011, when U.S. Navy SEALs swooped down into a high-walled compound in Pakistan and killed Osama bin Laden. It revealed something that had been clear pretty much from the start: When the U.S. invaded Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, it also went to war with Pakistan, its next-door neighbor. Bin Laden, who launched the deadliest attack on U.S. soil, had been holed up on the outskirts of Abbottabad. The city of 200,000 is 100 miles inside Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, just down the street from the Pakistan Military Academy—that nation's West Point.

But Pakistan sheltering bin Laden wasn't so strange. After all, Pakistan had been offering safe haven to bin Laden's al-Qaida and Afghanistan's Taliban insurgents ever since the U.S. government drove the Taliban out of power in Afghanistan 10 years earlier—for offering bin Laden sanctuary. There were plenty of denials from Islamabad, and willful ignorance from

Washington, about Pakistan's double-dealing. If the leaders in Islamabad didn't know, it was because they didn't want to know. But it became clear shortly after the war began that Pakistan would succor U.S. foes in two ways: By supplying them inside Afghanistan while they were fighting there, and by hiding them inside Pakistan when they weren't. That represented the sucking chest wound that would keep the U.S. from prevailing in its longest war.

The U.S. will soon pull all of its troops out of Afghanistan, under orders from President Joe Biden. A fresh U.S. intelligence assessment

The Pashtuns, who make up more than 40% of Afghanistan's 39 million people, straddle what the Pentagon calls the Af-Pak border. They sheltered al-Qaida and the Taliban on the Pakistani side, beyond the reach of U.S. guns. It turned that forbidding, mountainous frontier into a 21st Century Ho Chi Minh trail, the supply route through Laos and Cambodia that fueled the communist insurgency in South Vietnam a half-century earlier.

"The issue of sanctuary—of places where the Taliban and other insurgents could rest and plan attacks ... was at the heart of America's problems in Afghanistan," Wesley Mor-

The U.S. never declared precisely what prevailing in Afghanistan would look like.

warns that the central government in Kabul could fall to the Taliban within six months of those final U.S. combat boots leaving Afghan soil. The world's most powerful military was kept from achieving its aims—it was defeated, in non-diplo parlance—by a powerful Pashtun tribal insurgency.

gan writes in *The Hardest Place*, his just-published book on what went wrong in Afghanistan. "Pakistan provided the Taliban-led insurgency with a huge and permanent safe haven."

It didn't start out that way. "This particular battle front will last as long as it takes to bring al Qaeda to jus-

tice,” then-President George W. Bush declared four days after the invasion began. “It may happen tomorrow, it may happen a month from now, it may take a year or two, but we will prevail.” The U.S. never declared precisely *what* prevailing in Afghanistan would look like, and nuclear-armed Pakistan did just enough, long enough, to ensure the U.S. would *not* prevail. Washington also flunked the second test of the so-called Powell doctrine, named for Colin Powell, the retired Army general who ended up serving as secretary of state on 9/11, which was: “Do we have a clear attainable objective?”

Before 9/11, Pakistan was one of only three nations to recognize the brutal Taliban government running Afghanistan (the others were Saudi

Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). Pakistan’s military—the strongest, most important institution in the country—allied itself with both the U.S. military and the Taliban, playing one against the other, after 9/11.

I recall the war’s early days, when I was covering the Pentagon for *Time Magazine*. The Taliban had been driven out of Kabul in two months; Pentagon officials began expressing private optimism that U.S. troops would start coming home by summer 2002. But then the U.S. made the fatal choice to try to nurture a central government in a land historically torn by tribal disputes. Eighteen more summers would pass before Washington finally abandoned that quest as unachievable. By the time the fourth U.S. president

overseeing the war decided to call it quits, nearly 2,500 U.S. troops and almost 4,000 workers for U.S. contractors had died in Afghanistan. The bill paid for by the American people ultimately will top \$2 trillion—nearly \$7,000 for each of us.

Flipping through two decades of reporter’s notebooks highlights a U.S. government rightfully eager to avenge 9/11, but dismissive of the need to confront Pakistan and shut down its support for the very perpetrators of those attacks.

U.S. officials knew Pakistan was a challenge from the war’s earliest days but chose to look on the bright side. U.S.-Pakistani relations fell apart in 1990, after the U.S. concluded Islamabad was trying to build a nuclear



U.S. soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division launch a 2006 patrol in Helmand province along Afghanistan’s border with Pakistan. (U.S. ARMY PHOTO)

bomb in secret (for which a valiant CIA analyst paid a heavy price). For more than a decade, there was no military-to-military relations between the two countries. “The sanctions didn’t work,” Christina Rocca, the top U.S. diplomat for the region at the time, said in 2003. “We’ve decided there had to be a better way to deal with Pakistan than to essentially tie our hands.” The countries resumed a chary relationship. Washington believed that the Pakistani government’s fear over the insurgency deepening in their own country—and more than \$30 billion in U.S. aid—would keep Afghanistan’s eastern neighbor from causing too much trouble.

There was a chorus of praise from U.S. officials early on. “Pakistan has done more for the United States in the direct fight against al Qaeda than any other country I know of,” Army General John Abizaid, then-chief of U.S. Central Command, said in 2004.

“We certainly value Pakistan in the global war on terror,” Colonel Cardon Crawford said in 2005, when he was the Army’s operations chief in Afghanistan. “We think they’re a huge ally.”

“The Pakistanis are a vital partner in the war on terror,” Michael Vickers, then-assistant secretary of defense for special operations, said in 2008.

There were flashes of cooperation, to be sure. Pakistani soldiers, for example, acted as forward observers for U.S. artillery, guiding in long-range artillery rounds on Taliban targets along the border. But for each step the Pakistani military took to help the U.S. in Afghanistan, it took many more that gave oxygen to the enemy. “If your Pakistani ally says you can go through their country but only at night and leave no visible footprint in the day, this kind of constraints your

options. Okay?” General Robert Magnus, then-assistant commandant of the Marine Corps, said in 2006. “Not that they would really do that?” a reporter interjected. “Well,” Magnus said to laughter, “not that they would.”

What do safe havens provide? “Knowledge and rest and refit and planning and just, you’re not under the pressure of being found and hunted and having to protect yourself,” Army Lieutenant General Thomas Metz, the then-head of the Pentagon shop set up to defeat improvised explosive devices, said in 2008. “It gives you time and energy to do other things. That’s to me the tremendous advantage of a safe haven.”

The U.S. war in Afghanistan was always a two-front conflict. “You must have parallel progress really in Pakistan commensurate with what we have in Afghanistan,” James Conway, then-commandant of the Marine Corps, said in 2009. “Otherwise it’s like squeezing a balloon. We can be

“You have the watches, but we have the time,” has long been a familiar refrain from Taliban fighters.

wonderfully successful in Afghanistan and simply have delayed the problem because people would flush across the border into Pakistan—safe haven—we can’t touch them. Then when we say, ‘Okay, we’re done here,’ and we start pulling out, they come back. That would be a very bad scenario, but in some ways that’s what’s happened now, if you track the whole Afghanistan thing over the years.”

Ten months later a new president, after nine months in office, ordered 30,000 more U.S. troops to Afghanistan, a nearly 50% increase, to pop that

balloon. President Barack Obama told West Point cadets it would help bring the war to a successful conclusion.

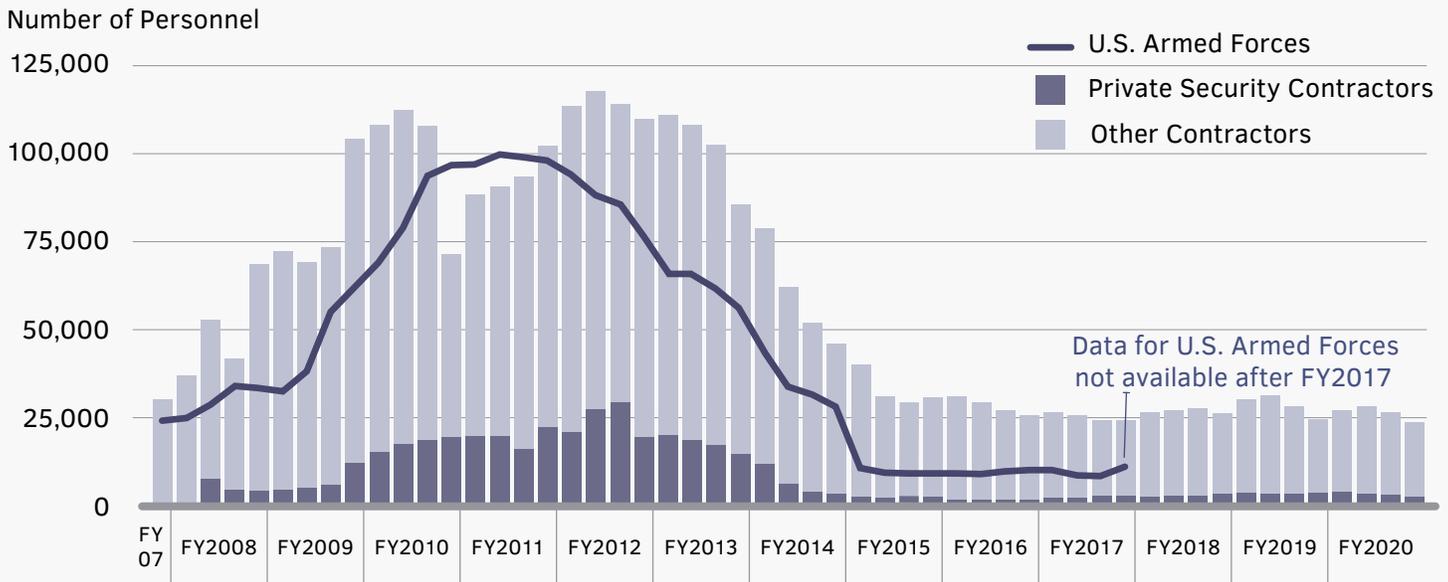
Obama limited the surge to 18 months, knowing that the U.S. public has little appetite for wars that drag on. His strategy collided with those safe havens inside Pakistan, which allowed the enemy to outwait—outwit?—the U.S. “You have the watches, but we have the time,” has long been a familiar refrain from Taliban fighters. That was true right from the start. “Part of the problem that we have in this war that is being waged throughout my area of operations is patience,” Abizaid said in 2004. “Culturally speaking, our patience quotient is not high. Culturally speaking, the patience quotient of our enemies is very high. We think in terms of sound bites of 15 seconds; they think in terms of hundreds of years.”

Well, maybe more than 15 seconds. “There is a thirst to solve this overnight,” Admiral Mike Mullen, then the

chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in 2008, seven years after the war began. “We’re just not going to solve it overnight.”

Pakistan’s perfidy broke into the open when the U.S. killed bin Laden deep inside the country. The SEALs struck without letting Pakistan know they were on their way, fearing bin Laden would be tipped off. Relations between Washington and Islamabad, already tepid, chilled. “Obviously the bin Laden operation intensified the degree of difficulty, if you will, with respect to the relationship,” Mullen

U.S. ARMED FORCES AND DOD-FUNDED CONTRACTOR PERSONNEL IN AFGHANISTAN Q4 FY2007-Q4 2020



Source: Congressional Research Service (R44116), reproduced by POGO. Contractor levels drawn from USCENTCOM Quarterly Contractor Census Reports. U.S. Armed Forces levels through Q42017 drawn from “Boots on the Ground” monthly reports to Congress.

Notes: DOD began releasing data on contractors in USCENTCOM in Q4 FY2007. U.S. Armed Forces levels from FY2007 in FY2017 includes all active and reserve component personnel. After FY2017, DOD began withholding U.S. Armed Forces levels from public release.

said June 2, 2011, a month after bin Laden’s death. “We all agree we’re going through a pretty tough time right now.”

Pakistan’s goal was to drive the U.S. out, leaving Afghanistan a vassal state and reducing the influence

said in 2012, after spending a year in southern Afghanistan. “There isn’t an Afghan leader that I speak to that doesn’t blame Pakistan for all their problems.”

Those problems would never go away. “From my perspective as a mil-

pretty close around Afghanistan... maintaining stability in the region is as important as establishing stability in Afghanistan,” he added. “As long as the regional stability is sustained, and we don’t have nuclear conflagration and all that kind of stuff, what we did will pay off.”

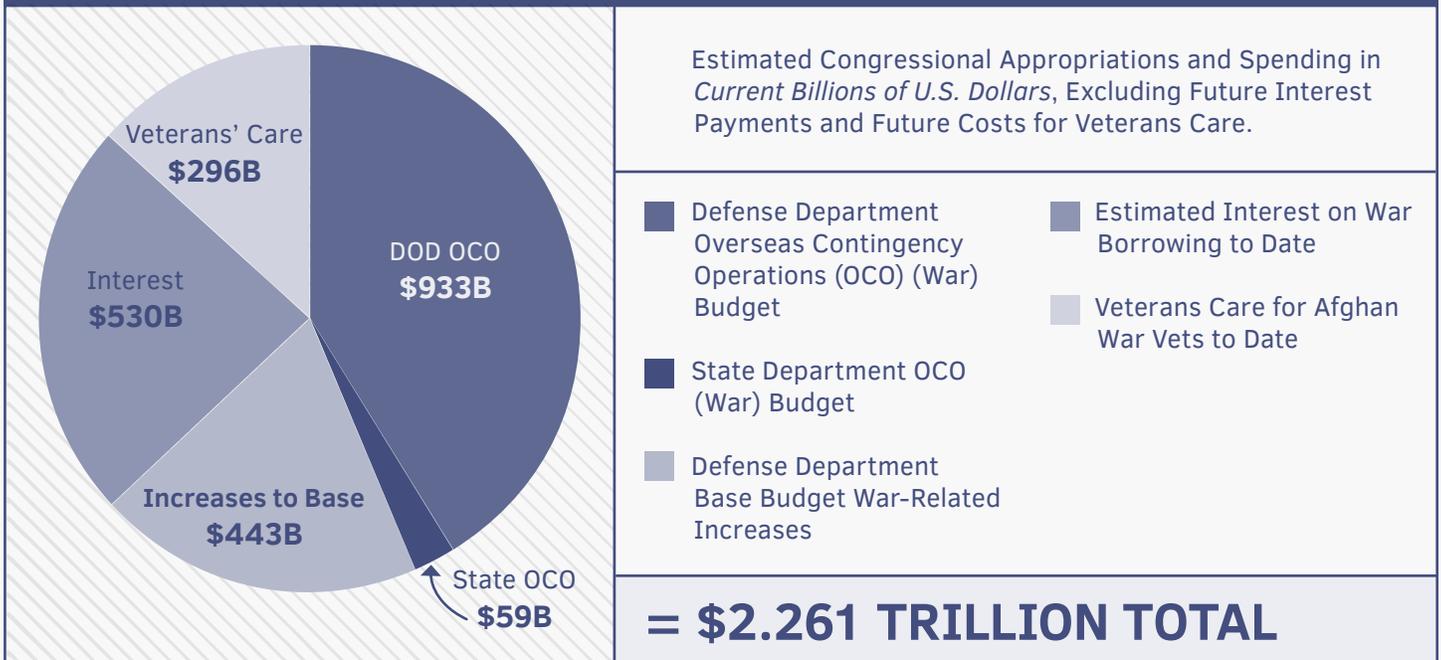
Over the past decade, it became increasingly clear that the war had ground to a stalemate, with Islamabad’s help. “Pakistan is a haven for numerous Islamist extremist and terrorist groups, and successive Pakistani governments are widely believed to have tolerated and even supported some of these as proxies in Islamabad’s historical conflicts with its neighbors,” the Congressional Research Service reported in 2019. “The 2011 revelation that al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden had enjoyed

Today, al Qaeda and the Taliban are back in business together, thwarting the very reason the U.S. invaded Afghanistan 20 years ago.

there of India, its arch-enemy. U.S. military officials, increasingly sensing Pakistan’s long game, began speaking more freely. “Right now there’s freedom of movement across that border, and drug facilitation and lethal aid movement is a constant,” Marine Major General John Toolan

itary commander having to deal with the problem, it’s like I can’t shut the water off,” Toolan said. “I just keep mopping the floor, but I can’t turn the water off.” The stakes, he added, were high, given Pakistan’s stockpile of perhaps 150 nuclear weapons. “There is a lot of nuclear weapons

U.S. COSTS TO DATE FOR THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN
in \$ Billions, 2001-2021



Source: Brown University Costs of War Project

years-long refuge in Pakistan led to intensive U.S. government scrutiny of the bilateral relationship, and sparked congressional questioning of the wisdom of providing significant aid to a nation that may not have the intention or capacity to be an effective partner.”

Donald Trump called for pulling out of Afghanistan as early as 2011. “We have wasted an enormous amount of blood and treasure in Afghanistan,” he tweeted in 2013. Once elected, he kept up the pressure. “For its part, Pakistan often gives safe haven to agents of chaos, violence, and terror,” Trump told a military audience in 2017. “We can no longer be silent about Pakistan’s safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond.” But Pakistan, he added, was merely a speed bump on

the road to victory in Afghanistan. “In the end,” he pledged after seven months in office, “we will win.”

Of course, that depends on how you define “win.” Under Trump’s 2020 deal with the Taliban, essentially endorsed by Biden, the Afghan insurgents said they would bar terrorists like al-Qaida from operating inside Afghanistan. But U.S. intelligence officials don’t believe it. Today, al-Qaida and the Taliban are back in business, together, thwarting the very reason the U.S. invaded Afghanistan 20 years ago.

On January 4, the U.S. Treasury painted a grim picture of the two as part of its work to choke off funding for terrorists. “Al-Qaeda is gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under the Taliban’s protection,” it said. Bin Laden’s group “capitalizes on its rela-

tionship with the Taliban through its network of mentors and advisers who are embedded with the Taliban, providing advice, guidance, and financial support.” The U.S. says it will monitor what is happening inside Afghanistan from posts outside the country and attack, if necessary, to keep it that way. But not from inside Pakistan. Islamabad, suggesting a certain nervy nonchalance, said May 11 that it will not permit U.S. troops to be based in Pakistan to keep an eye on possible threats growing next door in Afghanistan.

Frankly, this is a lousy return on a mammoth U.S. investment. The Pentagon says the war cost \$824.9 billion. But it uses a narrow definition. Accounting for the war’s full cost—like long-term medical care for those who served, and interest on the money borrowed for the war—pushes the total



Army General David Petraeus visits U.S. and Afghan troops near Afghanistan's border with Pakistan in 2010. (U.S. ARMY / STAFF SERGEANT BRADLEY LAIL)

cost to \$2.3 trillion, according to the Costs of War Project at Brown University. Most importantly, according to the project, 2,442 U.S. troops died in Afghanistan, about 1% of the nearly quarter-million people killed during this war. As searing as those losses are, others lost their lives as well: 3,846 U.S. contractor employees, almost 50,000 Afghan civilians, and nearly 70,000 Afghan troops and police.

Biden has opted for a fingers-crossed, hope-based withdrawal, unlike the perpetually just-out-of-reach conditions-based withdrawal the Pentagon wanted. "It's not a foregone conclusion that there'll be an automatic fall of Kabul," Army General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said April 28, referring to the Afghan capital. That's a remarkable downsizing of presidential pledges to "win" and "prevail." But it's also a point-blank acknowledgement by the nation's top military officer that prolonging the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan wouldn't ensure victory.

The United States is likely to end up losing its longest war, just as it ended

up losing its previous longest war, in Vietnam. The parallels are pertinent, and their lessons should be learned to keep the nation from making the same mistake a third time. Both wars bogged down because of support and supply lines beyond the borders of South Vietnam and Afghanistan.

The U.S. too often sees itself as Captain America, clad in red, white, and blue. But these kinds of wars require a white-coated Doctor America, instead. She needs to determine if the conflict is a localized tumor that can be cut out. Kicking Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991 was that kind of war. But when the conflict has metastasized due to cultural, economic, and tribal links that know no border, even the U.S. and its military, with all its firepower, cannot save the patient. In the wake of something like the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. needs to destroy those responsible as quickly as possible, without feeling any need to remake the nation involved, before heading home.

Robert McNamara, who as defense secretary from 1961 to 1968 and who was the architect of the Vietnam War, finally came clean in his 1995 book,

In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam. It took him decades to acknowledge that the war was a mistake. "My voice would have had no impact at all at that point," he told me when the book came out, trying to explain why he kept his doubts to himself when he left the Pentagon. "My voice would have had no impact whatsoever." That made about as much sense as his belated reason for finally coming clean. "He said he wanted to help prevent the country from making similar mistakes in the future," I noted in *Time* after he died in 2009. "He fretted that just as Washington misperceived Vietnam a generation ago, it remained in danger of making a similar mistake."

McNamara's warning went unheeded, as one of his successors has admitted. "I believe we—and the Afghans—would have been better served had our military departed in 2002 and had thereafter relied on non-military instruments of national power," Robert Gates, who served as defense secretary for both Bush and Obama from 2006 to 2011, acknowledged last year.

What took McNamara 27 years to concede only took Gates nine. Guess that qualifies as some kind of progress. Next time—and there will be a next time—let's hope those in charge know the limits of American power, and, tempering U.S. hubris with humility, act accordingly. ■

A version of this piece was first published in May 2021. The original and its sources can be found at pogo.org/key-reason

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: The Military-Industrial Circus is a regular column by Pulitzer prize-winning National Security Analyst Mark Thompson for the Center for Defense Information at POGO.

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So far this year the Center for Defense Information has testified before Congress four times. Below is an adapted excerpt of testimony the director, Mandy Smithberger, gave before the Senate Budget committee.

Pentagon Spending Ripe for Reduction and Reform

BY MANDY SMITHBERGER

For today’s hearing, I’d like to particularly focus on what drives wasteful and endless Pentagon spending. Defense Department spending continues to increase at an unsustainable rate. Significant cuts to the department’s budget are necessary to create the incentives and pressure for reforms that address how the department spends its money and how it fails to set priorities. Testimony heard before this committee nearly 40 years ago from then-Department of Defense analyst Franklin Spinney largely remains true: Pursuing gold-plated weapons has

resulted in paying too much money for too little capability. The increasingly fragile and expensive weapon systems undermine our military effectiveness. The department needs broad reforms. Buying unproven weapon systems in quantity before testing is complete, awarding contracts to companies with histories of waste and misconduct, and giving disproportionate funding to an agency that is years away from being able to pass an audit wastes taxpayer dollars and reduces overall readiness. The only way there will ever be reform is if there is accountability for failed programs and wasted funds. That accountability must include real budget consequences. Throwing more

money at the department will only make the problems worse. The Department’s most expensive program—the F-35—is an instructive case study of current problems and their expensive consequences. At the beginning of the F-35 program, the aircraft’s public image was that it would be “more Chevrolet than Porsche.” This year the Air Force chief of staff called it a Ferrari. While there are many lessons to be drawn from the F-35 program, there are four I want to highlight:

- Fly before you buy.
- Insist on good data from the start
- Beware complexity.

- Secure intellectual property rights to enhance competition.

The conventional wisdom is that the F-35 program is politically untouchable due to sunk costs and because it has contracts spread out across the country. It's difficult to come up with a bigger indictment of our acquisition approach than continuing to buy a weapon because our political system is too corrupt to change course.

We also have an acquisition system designed to increase costs. The most significant problem is the corrupting influence of the revolving door of senior Pentagon officials who go on to work for the defense contractors. The end result is officials appearing to, or actually, confusing what is in the best interest of national security with what is in the best financial interests of defense contractors.

While I've already discussed some of the major challenges in how the department purchases major weapon systems, it's also important to examine how the department gets fleeced even when it's buying a pin or a drainpipe. We've tracked spare parts overcharges for decades, and the issue is not getting better. The overpriced plastic toilet seat covers that cost \$640 in the 1980s now cost \$10,000. While TransDigm became appropriately infamous for charging profit margins as high as 4,000%, other contractors regularly engage in similar practices to take advantage of taxpayers: Reports from the Department of Defense inspector general show the department paid excessive amounts for spare parts from Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, and other top defense contractors. Overcharges to the government have included paying \$2,286 for a landing

gear that should have cost \$10; \$71 for a pin that should have cost less than a nickel; and \$8,124 for a bevel gear that should have cost \$445.

One of the root causes of these overcharges is misuse of commercial item designations, which makes it difficult for the government to obtain cost or pricing information to determine whether the prices contractors are charging are reasonable. When an item is designated as commercial, contractors generally do not have to provide cost or pricing information to the government. POGO supports the department buying genuinely commercial items, especially when there is competition, but determining whether something is truly commercial should be based on whether the item is sold on the open market to the public in substantial quantities. It can be difficult for the public to know how much we are overcharged for these parts because the department and contractors consider those overcharges to be commercial proprietary information. If something were truly commercial, prices wouldn't be secret. Recent changes to acquisition laws have exacerbated the problem, making it difficult for the government to obtain cost or pricing data once another governmental entity has already accepted something is commercial. Worse, once the government has accepted the prices, it can be difficult for the government to secure a refund, if auditors find there were overcharges, because companies aren't actually breaking any laws. Reforming the definition of "commercial item," as the Obama administration previously proposed, is an overdue reform that will help reduce overpayments and waste. At the very least, certified cost or pricing data should be provided to the government

in any procurement that is sole source, even in instances when goods and services are claimed to be commercial.

While many people think of the Department of Defense as being in the business of buying planes, tanks, and ships, nearly 50% of what the department buys is services. Last year the department spent nearly \$204 billion on service contracts. It is essential to better track this data because service contract spending provides one of the most significant opportunities for savings. POGO's review of service contracting data found contractor employees cost nearly three times more than the average civilian employee.

We recommend four major areas of reform:

- Stop the revolving door between the Pentagon and the defense industry.
- Reform acquisition laws to empower the department to make smart buying decisions.
- Increase transparency in and curtail overuse of service contracting.
- Enhance the government's tools to ensure taxpayer dollars only go to responsible contractors.

The importance of the Department of Defense's mission, along with its significant taxpayer resources, means that it must be a model of efficiency, accountability, and transparency.

Continue reading at
pogo.org/reduction-and-reform

A version of this piece was first published in May 2021. The original and its sources can be found at pogo.org/reduction-and-reform

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America's Nearly \$1.3 Trillion National Security Budget Isn't Making Us Any Safer



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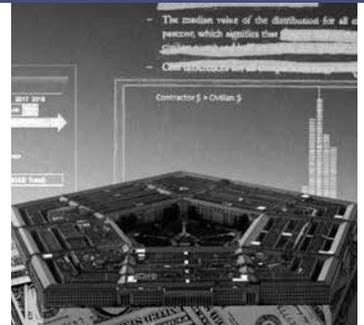
ACCOUNTABILITY

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MARK THOMPSON

THE KEY REASON THE U.S. LOST IN AFGHANISTAN

Pakistan: 1; US: 0



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MANDY SMITHBERGER

PETAGON SPENDING RIPE FOR REDUCTION AND REFORM

Testimony before the Senate Budget Committee