Afghanistan Proved Eisenhower Correct
The Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex Failed Us After 9/11

BY DAN GRAZIER

Americans watched in horror as Afghanistan fell to the Taliban in a matter of days, despite the lives and treasure spent there over twenty years. Most of the criticism of the disastrous end to the Afghanistan War and the rest of the post-9/11 wars has focused on the four presidents who helmed them. There is plenty of blame to lay at their feet because each contributed to those winless wars.

President George W. Bush decided to keep American forces in Afghanistan after achieving the mission’s primary security objective of disrupting al Qaeda. President Barack Obama doubled down on the war by surging troops into the country and expanding the nation-building effort. President Donald Trump’s peace deal set the stage for the August defeat by providing the Taliban with a timeline for its eventual takeover.

And while an end to the Afghanistan War was long overdue, President Joe Biden’s mishandling of the withdrawal completed the debacle, leaving many Americans and Afghans who helped us little time or security to flee the county.

History will judge all of them, but the inquiry should not stop with them. Almost as soon as the terrorists attacked the United States in September 2001, the military-industrial-congressional complex flew into action to get a piece of the lucrative wartime pie. In just one egregious example less than a month after the attacks, then-Representative Norm Dicks (D-WA) cited the attacks as a reason to move forward with a deeply flawed aerial tanker leasing scheme with Boeing. The defense contractors, the military leaders who wanted to work for them, and the members of Congress who took campaign contributions from them were all just as...
PART 1
MILITARY LEADERS AFRAID TO ADMIT FAILURE

Over the course of the 20 years of war just in Afghanistan, top military commanders made so many rosy pronouncements about our progress that Americans grew inured to them. Here is a brief sample:

- “Afghanistan is a place where military and economic, political and diplomatic activity at both the national level of the United States and also the international level came together in a way that, over the three years that we’ve been operating there, has shown interesting progress.” General John Abizaid, February 2005.
- “In the face of an enemy willing to carry out the most barbaric of attacks, progress has been achieved in some critical areas, and we are poised to realize more.” General David Petraeus, July 2010.
- “I think we are on the road to winning.” General John Allen, February 2013.
- “I would say overall our mission in Afghanistan is on a positive trajectory. I can elaborate on that with you later, but thus far, in keeping with the campaign plan that I outlined, we have seen the Afghans successfully defend each of these areas, largely by taking offensive operations against the enemy, and the Taliban has not yet been able to realize any of their territorial ambitions this year.” General John Nicholson, July 2016.

“I don’t know how many generals I heard who have talked about — we were turning the corner.” John Sopko, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, said of these flag-officer assessments. “We turned the corner so many times we looked like a top just spinning out of control.”

As the generals uttered these statements, the Taliban continued its
advance across Afghanistan, capturing more and more territory.

Their rosy statements about the outlook of the conflict fit within a pattern of behavior we have unfortunately come to expect from our senior military leaders. A general or admiral at the three- or four-star rank is at the end of a long career, so it’s only natural for them to consider what will come next. For most of them, the next step is to leverage the position and trust they have achieved through their government service to secure a lucrative private sector position. This is fine if the positions they choose don’t create conflicts of interest. They could use the skills they developed through their service to work in any industry that doesn’t trade on their connections, but all too often they choose to enter the defense industry, where it’s who they know — not what they know — that matters.

The eight generals who headed the war in Afghanistan between 2008 and 2018 now serve on the boards of more than 20 corporations, many of which deal directly with the Pentagon, according to disclosures reviewed by the Washington Post. In addition to the six-figure, taxpayer-funded retirement they receive, these former commanders rake in millions of dollars as consultants, as corporate board members, and in speaking fees. Opportunities like that are not presented to those who contradict the DC consensus.

Retired Marine colonel and current Center for Defense Information military advisory board member G.I. Wilson explained in 2011 why military officials in high positions would be reluctant to tell the truth about Iraq and Afghanistan. “Nurturing the Pentagon money flow and the domestic political environment that supports it while influencing their chosen successors — often their former aides — to keep the money spigots open profoundly changes the message the retired generals and colonels send to the listening audience,” he wrote.

Servicemembers within the ranks were reluctant to speak publicly about the war for fear of hurting their careers. The Washington Post obtained what have become known as the Afghanistan Papers and published them in 2019, and those published dispatches revealed just how many people involved in the war knew the U.S. was fighting a lost cause. Even more revealing was that most only agreed to speak candidly with the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction if they were assured anonymity; that is a clear demonstration that dissent would not be tolerated. A few people in the military made public their concerns about the war’s progress anyway. Army Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Davis, now a member of POGO’s military advisory board, took his concerns to Congress in 2012, but he was a rare exception and was treated like a pariah for doing so.

The kind of self-serving behavior senior military leaders engage in to remain members in good standing within the complex is eroding the trust that rank-and-file servicemembers place in them. A Marine lieutenant colonel posted a controversial video lambasting leadership, calling for the generals involved to be held accountable for the Afghanistan debacle. He ended up being charged with several crimes and spent more than a week in the brig before pleading guilty and ultimately receiving a light sentence. While questions about the propriety of his actions and methods remain, the response he received should serve as a wake-up call for the star-spangled brass. A scroll through any social media posting about that story shows many people criticizing the way he delivered the message, some who take exception to the extremes to which it ventures, as well as a great deal of support and praise for his actions. What you don’t find are many people defending Pentagon leadership. That lack of trust in their leaders should concern all Americans.

PART 2
CONTRACTORS AT THE SPIGOT

While the United States didn’t win in Iraq or Afghanistan, American defense contractors and their shareholders certainly did. The American people paid approximately $14 trillion to fight the post-9/11 wars, about half of which went into the coffers of defense contractors who either supplied weapons and equipment or provided services to support the war and reconstruction efforts. William Hartung at the Center for International Policy recently reported that just the top five U.S. Pentagon contractors — Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, General Dynamics, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman — received more than $2.1 trillion worth of contracts during the post-9/11 spending surge. During the same time, the big five spent $1.1 billion for lobbyists, meaning that for every dollar they spent lobbying, they received a staggering $1,909 in taxpayer funds in return.

Building weapons is only one way to make money from a war. Nearly as lucrative are the various service contracts awarded to support and often supplement the services overseas. The U.S. military now outsources many functions uniformed servicemembers once performed. The sprawling bases
set up to support the wars were full of civilian contractors building facilities, delivering mail, operating dining facilities, and providing general logistical support. According to Bloomberg, the Pentagon spent $107.9 billion for service contracts in Afghanistan alone.

The use of private companies to support the war generated significant controversy from the very beginning. The use of the largest of these providers — Halliburton and its subsidiary Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR) — was particularly concerning because it had once been helmed by then-Vice President Dick Cheney. A number of years earlier, when Cheney was secretary of defense, the Pentagon awarded Halliburton a nearly $9 million contract for a study showing how private companies could provide support for overseas military deployments. Cheney became the CEO of Halliburton following his stint as defense secretary, and resigned from the company to run for the vice presidency in the ultimate revolving door routine. KBR quickly secured contracts to support U.S. military personnel all over the world for up to $5 billion a year.

The Pentagon not only outsourced much of its own logistical support, it also outsourced significant military functions such as base security, local police and military force training, and embassy and critical infrastructure protection. Organizations like Blackwater, CACI, Titan Corporation, and Triple Canopy recruited law enforcement and former servicemembers to provide these services.

The Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction reported that by 2008, the Pentagon and State Department had paid $5.3 billion to 77 private security contractors “in support of U.S.-funded projects and programs since 2003.” Contracts like this were still being awarded years after the bipartisan Wartime Contracting Commission recommended that the government phase out the use of private security contractors for certain functions and receive greater scrutiny and supervision from government employees. The Commission found that as of 2011, “at least $31 billion, and possibly as much as $60 billion, has been lost to contract waste and fraud.” But the government continued to contract with private security firms, which raked in $2.3 billion to provide approximately 6,000 workers in Afghanistan in 2019 alone.

Private security contractors have been involved in some of the most notorious violent incidents in the post-9/11 wars. The most shocking incident involving private security contractors happened in Iraq in 2007 when a team of Blackwater employees guarding a U.S. embassy convoy through Baghdad fired into a crowd of civilians in Nisour Square, killing 17 people and wounding 24. A federal jury convicted four of the Blackwater guards, finding them guilty of murder, manslaughter, and weapons charges in 2014. In December 2020, then-President Donald Trump pardoned them.

It shouldn’t come as any surprise that the loudest voices opposing the withdrawal from Afghanistan were those who stood to profit the most from the war’s continuation. CACI, for instance, had received a five-year, $907 million contract in 2019 to provide the Army with intelligence operations and analytic support in Afghanistan. Company executives told their investors during an August 2021 earnings call they expected to take a “$120 million or so hit from Afghanistan” in the first half of 2022 due to the withdrawal from Afghanistan. The company responded by pumping money into DC think tanks. The “experts” it funded this way were all over the media decrying the withdrawal. For example, retired Army General Jack Keane, chairman of the CACI-funded Institute for the Study of War said on Fox News that Afghanistan is “going to become a more dangerous place, threatening America.”

Self-interested contractors didn’t start the post-9/11 wars, but their financial motives certainly helped fuel their continuation for 20 years. A congressional blue-ribbon panel of experts published a report in February 2021 urging the Biden administration to extend the Afghanistan withdrawal date without revealing that 11 of the 15 panel members had recently been on the payroll of the defense industry. Moving forward, the Pentagon, through stringent congressional oversight, needs to wean itself from its dependence on service contractors and return to the practice of uniformed servicemembers performing their own essential support. Doing so would help decrease the profit motive to extend overseas military missions. It would also be far less expensive. A POGO study found that it costs the taxpayers nearly three times more to use defense contractors than it would to use someone in uniform to perform the same job.

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Defence for the People, Not for Contractors

Right now, defense contractors are used to getting their way because there are not enough voices outside of Washington, D.C. telling their elected representatives that enough is enough.

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The Pentagon’s China Syndrome

The U.S. military always creates a powerful foe

“Although initial operations might have to be conventional for political reasons, atomic strikes against the Chinese mainland would eventually be necessary if the Chinese Communist move was to be stopped effectively and quickly.”

That’s how U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff reportedly reacted in 1958, after the country then commonly known as Red China launched artillery strikes on Great Kinmen Island, about five miles off the Chinese coast. Like other italicized excerpts to follow, it comes from a once-top secret 1966 RAND Corporation study into the crisis, released in full by Daniel Ellsberg in 2017. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) eventually backed down from its quest to seize the Taiwan-controlled territory. But China was a poor, agrarian nation 63 years ago, not the economic and military giant it has become over the past two generations. And the U.S. is not the superpower it was in 1958, either.

China is no longer interested in merely taking the 60-square miles of the Kinmen islands (also known as Quemoy), but Taiwan, as well. Beijing has viewed the 14,000-square-mile island as a renegade province ever since Chairman Mao Zedong’s communist revolution took over the mainland in 1949. Chiang Kai-shek’s defeated Nationalist government moved to Taiwan, roughly 100 miles out in the Pacific. They established a pro-Western government. Taiwan, officially the Republic of China, today is a thriving democracy and home to the globe’s largest silicon-chip contractor, vital to producing everything from iPhones to automobiles.

According to a Foreign Policy analysis, Mainland China’s military is 10 times bigger than Taiwan’s. But the most important weapon in Taiwan’s arsenal is the line in the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act declaring that the U.S. will “consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means … a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.” The U.S. has tried to have it both ways by hinting it will defend Taiwan from Chinese attack, without explicitly saying so. Leaders in Washington believe this tentative commitment (which, like military intelligence, is somewhat of an oxymoron) will restrain Taiwan’s push for true independence, while deterring China from attacking.

“A public commitment to the defense of the [Kinmen islands] was also to be avoided so that the additional PRC [Government of the Republic of China] leverage on the United States would not be present.”

The term of art among foreign policy professionals for this balancing act is “strategic ambiguity.” The rest of us can think of it as the “fog of (uncertainty that could lead to) war.” That policy has come under attack from some on Capitol Hill. In February, seven Republican lawmakers introduced what they call the “Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act,” committing the U.S. to use military force against China if Beijing attacks the island. Taiwan is “becoming the most dangerous flash point in the world,” the Council on Foreign Relations said in February. “The most dangerous place on Earth,” the Economist’s cover echoed in May. Since last year, China has routinely sent warplanes toward Taiwan, scrambling the island’s defenses, despite Chinese President Xi Jinping’s
October 5 assurance to U.S. President Joe Biden that China will continue to abide by the Taiwan Relations Act. Nonetheless, Washington is taking no chances. U.S. officials acknowledged October 7 that a small number of U.S. military troops have been on the island for at least a year, training Taiwanese forces. The same day, the CIA announced it has set up a “China Mission Center (CMC) to address the global challenge posed by the People’s Republic of China.” Tensions keep escalating, along with the chance of war, either deliberate or accidental.

The U.S. waged the Cold War against an inflated Soviet threat for nearly a half-century until it collapsed. Then it exaggerated the war on terror for 20 years. Following the Afghan debacle, the U.S. military is focusing on China to ensure its continuing fiscal fortunes.

So, once again, Pentagon officials are weighing the options to try to ensure that China would fail if it tried to take Taiwan by force. This is what military planners do: they plan for war. They were doing it, secretly, in 1958, and they’re doing it, secretly, in 2021. Chances of a war over Taiwan’s fate are growing.

“The United States must stand firm with conventional weapons as long as possible but then must be prepared to use nuclear weapons. Otherwise we would lose the whole world within three years.”

U.S. Navy Admiral John Aquilino, who commands all U.S. forces in the Pacific, said in March that he believes a Chinese military attack on Taiwan “is much closer to us than most think.” His predecessor predicted China could strike within six years.

Balderdash, others counter. For better or worse, the world’s two largest economies are locked in a chilly marriage, each too heavily dependent on the other to risk war. Put bluntly, a Chinese decision to invade Taiwan, via bombs, or choke it, via a blockade, would be very bad for business. Like gravity, big money can invisibly move things or, more importantly, keep them in place: an analysis from December 2020 estimated that U.S. investors held $100 billion of Chinese debt and $1.1 trillion in Chinese stocks; Chinese investors hold $1.4 trillion in U.S. debt and $720 billion in U.S. stocks. Meanwhile, China is dredging up islands in the South China Sea and setting up military outposts on them to extend its reach into those trade- and mineral-rich waters.

The last time the two powers tussled militarily over major strategic issues was in 1996, when a pair of U.S. aircraft carriers muted China’s push to sway Taiwan’s first democratic election. Such U.S. gunboat diplomacy likely won’t suffice a quarter-century later. U.S. flattops are increasingly vulnerable to China’s carrier-killing missiles. That’s a key part of China’s so-called anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) force, designed to keep U.S. firepower far from China’s shores. The Chinese military is “designed to inflict more casualties in the first 30 hours of combat than we’ve endured over the last 30 years in the Middle East,” Air Force General Mark Kelly, chief of the service’s Air Combat Command, said in September.

The U.S. has been shifting its military muscle from Europe to the Pacific ever since China’s rise — and increasingly aggressive policies — became clear. That includes working more closely with China’s nervous neighbors like Australia, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam — Vietnam! The U.S. struck a deal for nuclear-powered submarines with Australia in September. That upset the French, who thought they had a $60 billion dozen-diesel-sub deal sewn up with the Australians. The Washington-Canberra compact was part of a new coalition, with the U.S. and Australia joining forces with the United Kingdom in the so-called AUKUS alliance, plainly created to keep China cornered.

While China’s economy is set to top America’s sometime this decade, it lags far behind the U.S. when it comes to military might. But that’s also irrelevant: one of Xi’s top military goals is the “complete” of China, including Taiwan. But Taiwan isn’t interested. To do so by force, China doesn’t need a global military force like Washington’s. “Taiwan is like two feet from China. We are 8,000 miles away,” then-President Donald Trump reportedly told a Republican senator in 2019. “If they invade, there isn’t a f---ing thing we can do about it.”

Such thinking sends chills down the spines of those who believe the Taiwan Relations Act means the U.S. is committed to try to thwart any such Chinese move. But that might not be a winning strategy. “The only scenario in which we surrender the military advantage [over China] is if we foolishly choose to fight China over Taiwan,” retired Army officer Daniel L. Davis wrote in August. In that case, things could quickly spiral out of control.

Like two punch-drunk boxers after several grueling rounds of conventional war across the Taiwan Strait, the nuclear option might be all that’s left. “We need to ask whether the United States would use nuclear weapons first in a Taiwan Strait conflict if the conventional phase of that
war was heading strongly in China’s favour?” a May report from the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament asked. “Taiwan’s absorption would imply that Washington had been defeated by China in East Asia.

The rhetoric is ramping up. “The biggest source of chaos in the present-day world is the United States,” Xi reportedly said in February. “The United States is the biggest threat to our country’s development and security.” The stakes are far bigger today than they were back in 1958 or 1996. Xi seeks the “revival of the Chinese nation” that could eclipse the democratic-capitalist system, led by the U.S., which has been the world’s economic colossus since World War II.

China’s view is that the U.S. is in decline, and it doubts the American commitment to Taiwan’s defense. That only adds to U.S.-Chinese instability. A recent editorial in the state-affiliated Global Times newspaper warned Taiwan’s leaders not to rely on the U.S. “From what happened in Afghanistan,” it said, “they should perceive that once a war breaks out in the Straits, the island’s defense will collapse in hours and the U.S. military won’t come to help.”

Don’t bet against the U.S., Biden warns. “China has … an overall goal to become the leading country in the world, the wealthiest country in the word, and the most powerful country in the world,” he said in March. “That’s not going to happen on my watch.” Biden has also made it clear Taiwan is a priority for the U.S., repeatedly mentioning it in communiques and statements following meetings with foreign leaders.

Three days into the Biden administration, his State Department urged China “to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan and instead engage in meaningful dialogue with Taiwan’s democratically elected representatives.” The Congressional Research Service noted in a July report that “senior Biden Administration officials have used blunt language to warn China against any use of force against Taiwan.”

In August, the State Department approved the sale of an estimated $750 million in howitzers and other artillery equipment to Taiwan. The Biden administration’s first such deal with Taipei, it said it would bolster Taiwan’s “continuing efforts to modernize its armed forces and to maintain a credible defensive capability.” Taiwan hailed the news, saying it “demonstrates the U.S. government’s commitment to the Taiwan Relations Act.” China warned such sales could “cause more damages to China-U.S. relations and peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”

China-watchers are nervous. “U.S.-China relations are already at their worst point in decades, and the administration’s strikingly confrontational approach is likely to make things worse, while damaging other U.S. interests in the process,” foreign policy expert Jonathan Tepper warns. “As it reveals itself, the nascent Biden Doctrine is turning out to be far more dangerous than most analysts — or the administration — seem to appreciate.”

Unsurprisingly, the Pentagon and its allies maintain there is only one way to counter the growing China threat: more money. This echoes similar calls a generation ago warning of the hordes of 10-foot-tall Soviet soldiers ready to hop in the T-72 tanks and conquer Western Europe. “China is the pacing threat for us in uniform,” Army General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in July. “We are gearing our capabilities, our programs, our training, our skills, our activities, et cetera, militarily with China in mind. There’s no question about it.”

Some in the U.S. military say war between China and Taiwan, and the subsequent risk of U.S. — and maybe NATO — involvement is inevitable. “To us, it’s only a matter of time, not a matter of ‘if,’” U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Mike Studeman, the Pentagon’s top intel officer for the Pacific, said in July.

Critically, China has recently begun upping its nuclear game. The U.S. is concerned over what appears to be a major expansion in China’s land-based nuclear-missile silos. Historically, China’s nuclear arsenal has been less than 10% of those possessed by the U.S. and Russia, but the new ICBM fields in China suggest that may be changing. “The public has discovered what we have been saying all along about the growing threat the world faces and the veil of secrecy that surrounds it,” U.S. Strategic Command, which oversees the Pentagon’s nuclear forces, tweeted after non-governmental scientists revealed their existence.

China has long been content with a small nuclear force — a so-called second-strike deterrence posture — designed only to retaliate. But it increasingly looks like China wants to join the U.S. and Russia as a big-league nuclear power, with all the instability that entails. “The destabilizing dynamic originating from the PRC’s rapid and opaque nuclear build-up cannot be ignored,” Bonnie Jenkins, the undersecretary of state for arms control, recently warned NATO colleagues in Denmark. “The
unfortunate reality is that the United States and the PRC do not have the benefit of the same mature arms control relationship that we have with Russia, which was forged through decades of Cold War nuclear competition and cooperation.”

Admiral Charles Richard, who oversees U.S. nuclear weapons as chief of U.S. Strategic Command, said in August that China’s investment in atomic arms is a “strategic breakout” that will soon give Beijing the power to carry out “any plausible nuclear” strategy it wants. The “explosive growth and modernization of its nuclear and conventional forces can only be what I describe as breathtaking,” he added. “Frankly, that word, breathtaking, may not be enough.” Bottom line: China is striving to be able to do to the U.S. what the U.S. has long been able to do to China. Or, as Richard puts it: “China has correctly figured out, you can’t coerce a peer — in other words, us — from a minimum deterrent posture.”

“It is estimated that combined U.S./[Republic of] China capability to defend the OSI [Taiwan off-shore islands] without discretionary use of nuclear weapons would be costly and probably ineffective. Less forceful alternatives in the long run would prove disastrous.” – Top U.S. Air Force general in the Pacific, August 26, 1958

But how real is the threat? The U.S. military has a history of accentuating the negative when it comes to future wars. It “lost” a war-gaming exercise last fall that reflected a battle for Taiwan. “Without overstating the issue, [the U.S.] failed miserably,” Air Force General John Hyten, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs, said July 26. “An aggressive red team that had been studying the United States for the last 20 years just ran rings around us,” Hyten said. “They knew exactly what we’re going to do before we did it.” Of course, you should take such assessments with a grain of salt. This is the same military, after all, that said it was making progress in Afghanistan for the past 20 years.

Such Pentagon exercises are used to justify the need for new weapons, both unbought and unthought. “The U.S. Air Force repelled a Chinese invasion of Taiwan during a massive war game last fall by relying on drones acting as a sensing grid, an advanced sixth-generation fighter jet able to penetrate the most contested environments, cargo planes dropping pallets of guided munitions and other novel technologies yet unseen on the modern battlefield,” Defense News reported in April. “Many key technologies featured during the exercise are not in production or even planned for development by the service.”

But it’s not only new weapons that are needed to meet the Chinese threat. The Pentagon already has upgrades in the works for its still-not-ready-for-full-scale-production F-35 fighter, built by Lockheed Martin. Pratt & Whitney, which makes the F-35 engine, is also pushing for defense dollars to improve its performance against putative Chinese threats. “Now is the time we need to get the requirement in place, the funding, and then start the program,” a Pratt & Whitney executive told Defense News in August.

Then there’s the on-going PR offensive. Congress requires two annual reports detailing the Chinese threat, economic and military. “The PRC continues to signal its willingness to use military force against Taiwan,” the most recent Pentagon report, released in September 2020, said. “In the event of a protracted conflict, China might choose to escalate cyber-space, space, or nuclear activities in an attempt to end the conflict, or it might choose to fight to a stalemate and pursue a political settlement.”

In a war of words that could explode into real war overnight, words matter. Like the infamous Soviet Military Power books published regularly in the 1980s to justify the Reagan administration’s huge defense-spending surge, the Pentagon’s Chinese model contains some whoppers. “The PRC has the largest navy in the world, with an overall battle force of approximately 350 ships and submarines including over 130 major surface combatants,” the 2020 report says. “In comparison, the U.S. Navy’s battle force is approximately 293 ships as of early 2020.”

As it did with the Soviet Union, the Defense Department is taking legitimate concerns about another nation’s military and turning them into caricatures to boost military spending.

Given that any U.S.–Chinese war is going to be Navy-centric, that’s big news — if true. “I have big issues with this simplistic argument,” Michael O’Hanlon, a longtime Pentagon watcher at the Brookings Institution, countered. “The United States has much larger and more sophisticated ships than China. … America’s Navy remains way ahead in tonnage — still by a factor of at least two-to-one over China’s. It is ahead by at least ten-to-one in carrier-
based airpower.” Nonetheless, the Pentagon’s illusion persists. The Chinese “have the largest Navy in the world,” Richard, the Pentagon’s nuclear war-fighting chief, parroted in August.

As it did with the Soviet Union, the Defense Department is taking legitimate concerns about another nation’s military and turning them into cartoon caricatures to boost military spending. “Pentagon brass and defense corporations don’t want to see flat or reduced budgets, and need justification to continue to request high budgets,” Marine veteran Dan Grazier at the Project On Government Oversight recently noted. “Raising the specter of a China threat gives them reason to request more money.”

Congressional support for more money is bipartisan, even as U.S. military spending tops the Cold War average. “The defense budget tells the American people and allies that although we say China is a threat, we are not taking action to respond,” Representative Elaine Luria (D-VA), a Navy veteran who represents a Navy-dependent district, wrote in a Wall Street Journal op-ed in July. “Congress has a duty to close the ‘say-do’ gap, whether through increased funding or redirecting other Pentagon dollars, and to provide the resources needed to deter China.” Representative Mike Gallagher (R-WI), a Marine veteran, warned in July that “we don’t have that long” to build a naval fleet to counter China. “We have to act with a sense of urgency.” His district is home to one of the two shipyards building the Navy’s Littoral Combat Ships.

“Prepare Now for War in the Pacific,” read the headline over a Gallagher column in July’s Proceedings, a pro-Navy magazine published just down the street from the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. “Naval logistics must be able to deliver weapons, spare parts, food, fuel, and people in contested environments,” Gallagher wrote. “If we fail to reverse current trends, we are going to wake up one day and we will have either lost a war or abandoned Taiwan.”

Fact is, if war comes to the Pacific, the Marines say they won’t be able to rely on their long-standing logistical pipeline to keep leathernecks there supplied. “If they’re able to contest and really choke us off logistically, they’ll take us to our knees,” General David Berger, the Marine commandant, said in September. “The only thing I’m going to fly you in? Ordnance. And maybe JP [Jet Propellant] to refuel some aircraft, but it’s just fuel and bullets, that’s what I’m going to resupply. The rest you’re going to have to forage.”

U.S. Marine Corps, meet Gilligan’s Island.

“We have to recognize that we’re going to have to increase defense spending to keep up with the pace from China,” Representative Mike Rogers (R-AL), the senior GOP member of the House Armed Services Committee, said last spring. “They’re establishing their presence around the globe in strategic positions, and we just can’t ignore it unless we want to become subordinate to them, and I don’t think anybody in this country wants to do that.”

There is a silver lining here for the makers of gold-plated weapons: the prospect of a war over Taiwan is the best argument going for increased U.S. defense spending. You can hear echoes of President Ronald Reagan hyping the Soviet threat to more than double the Pentagon’s budget from $135 billion in 1980, the year he was elected, to $303 billion by the time he left office eight years later. The debate at the highest levels may be over nuclear weapons, but that’s not where the money is. The money is in conventional forces. Yet those tanks, ships, and airplanes are basically rendered irrelevant when each side has nuclear weapons.

“We will require atomic strikes on the Chinese mainland to effectively and quickly stop Chinese Communist aggression.” – U.S. Navy position paper, August 24, 1958

But both sides have way too much to lose to risk it all with atomic weapons. Assuming Taiwan is a vital U.S. interest, the Pentagon and its allies maintain that the only way to keep the nuclear genie in its bottle — is to spend enough money on non-nuclear weapons to keep China away from Taiwan. “Exaggerated estimates of the military challenges posed by China have become the new rationale of choice in arguments for keeping the Pentagon budget at historically high levels,” arms expert William Hartung wrote in a September report. “The most likely impact of the shift towards China will be to further tighten the grip of major weapons makers like Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics, and Raytheon Technologies on the Pentagon budget.”

Think of it as the ultimate military-industrial-complex con: unrestrained spending for a war that will never be fought.

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

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.
STAR CREEP
Inflation in the officer corps

It was great that the Congressional Research Service (CRS) looked into the makeup of those who wear the U.S. military uniform. But it issued a pair of stand-alone reports, basically a census of the Pentagon’s officer and enlisted ranks, without comparing them to each other (enlisted troops are 82% of those in uniform; officers are the other 18%).

So contrasting those numbers falls to The Bunker. Each report tallies up how many personnel, and at what rank, each service had as of September 30. It’s another opportunity to see just how top-heavy the U.S. military is.

The number of enlisted troops commanded by a single officer has dropped steadily since World War I. Back then, an Army officer led an average 14.3 soldiers. By World War II, that fell to 10.6. A Cold War Army officer had 6.7 grunts under him; by 2000 there was one officer per 5.2 soldiers. That number has continued to slide, dropping 35% over the past 30 years.

As of September 30, thanks to that pair of CRS reports, we know that an Army officer now commands 4.2 troops. The current ratio in the Navy is one officer per 5.1 sailors; in the Air Force it’s one officer for 4.1 enlisted Air Force personnel; and the Marines have one officer per 7.3 grunts. The ratio is higher in the Marines because its hierarchy is the flattest (i.e., fewer commanders) and its members are the youngest, with many serving only a single term of enlistment. The Navy and Air Force sail and fly advanced weapons, which boosts the number of officers (Air Force pilots, for example, must be officers). And the Army—easily the biggest service—has the infrastructure common to any gargantuan bureaucracy. That includes plenty of bosses. Across all four services, each officer commands an average of only 4.7 enlisted troops.

It’s even worse when you focus on generals and admirals, as a Marine colonel did in the Pentagon’s own Joint Forces Quarterly publication. But his observations apply just as well to all officers. “This development represents ‘rank creep’ that does not enhance mission success but clutters the chain of command, adds bureaucratic layers to decisions, and costs taxpayers additional money from funding higher paygrades to fill positions,” Gregory McCarthy wrote in 2017 while deployed to Africa. “Although historical numbers are inexact guides and future threats could radically change circumstances, the case for reduction is strong.”

Even Bunker boss Danielle Brian thinks the officer ranks are flabby. “The Pentagon uses officer inflation as one way to justify a bloated defense budget,” she said. “We have more officers than we need—and we’re running the risk of creating a military force of bureaucrats rather than warriors.”

She said that in…1998, three years before we invaded Afghanistan. That 20-year war ended, in humiliating defeat, for a U.S. military larded with far more pencil-pushers than trigger-pullers.

Continue reading at pogo.org/star-creep/

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: The Bunker is a precision-guided e-newsletter by Pulitzer prize-winning National Security Analyst Mark Thompson for the Center for Defense Information at POGO.
Opportunities to Cut More Than $1 Trillion from the Pentagon

This piece originally appeared on tomdispatch.com

BY MANDY SMITHBERGER
AND WILLIAM HARTUNG

Even as Congress moves to increase the Pentagon budget well beyond the astronomical levels proposed by the Biden administration, a new report from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) has outlined three different ways to cut $1 trillion in Department of Defense spending over the next decade. A rational defense policy could yield far more in the way of reductions, but resistance from the Pentagon, weapons contractors, and their many allies in Congress would be fierce.

After all, in its consideration of the bill that authorizes such budget levels for next year, the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives recently voted to add $25 billion to the already staggering $750 billion the Biden administration requested for the Pentagon and related work on nuclear weapons at the Department of Energy. By any measure, that’s an astonishing figure, given that the request itself was already far higher than spending at the peaks of the Korean and Vietnam Wars or President Ronald Reagan’s military buildup of the 1980s.

In any reasonable world, such a military budget should be considered both unaffordable and deeply unsuitable when it comes to addressing the true threats to this country’s “defense,” including cyberattacks, pandemics, and the devastation already being wrought by climate change. Worst of all, providing a blank check to the military-industrial-congressional complex ensures the continued production of troubled weapon systems like Lockheed Martin’s exorbitantly expensive F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, which is typically behind schedule, far above projected costs, and still not considered effective in combat.

Changing course would mean real reform and genuine accountability, starting with serious cuts to a budget for which “bloated” is far too kind an adjective.

THREE OPTIONS FOR REDUCTIONS

At the request of Senate Budget Committee Chair Bernie Sanders (I-VT), the CBO devised three different approaches to cutting approximately $1 trillion (a decrease of a mere 14%)
from the Pentagon budget over the next decade. Historically, it could hardly be a more modest proposal. After all, without any such plan, the Pentagon budget actually did decrease by 30% between 1988 and 1997.

Such a CBO-style reduction would still leave the department with about $6.3 trillion to spend over that 10-year period, 80% more than the cost of President Biden’s original $3.5 trillion Build Back Better proposal for domestic investments. Of course, that figure, unlike the Pentagon budget, has already been dramatically whittled down to half its original size, thanks to laughable claims by “moderate” Democrats like Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) that it would break the bank in Washington. Yet such critics of expanded social and economic programs rarely offer similar thoughts when it comes to the Pentagon’s far larger bite of the budgetary pie.

The options in the budget watchdog’s new report are anything but radical:

Option one would preserve the “current post-Cold War strategy of deterring aggression through [the] threat of immediate U.S. military response with the objectives of denying an adversary’s gains and recapturing lost territory.” The proposed cuts would hit each military service equally, with some new weapons programs slowed down and a few, as in the case of the B-21 bomber, cancelled.

Option two “adopts a Cold War-like strategy for large nuclear powers of making aggression very costly and recognizing that the size of conventional conflict would be limited by the threat of a nuclear response.” That leaves nearly $2 trillion for the Pentagon’s planned “modernization” of the U.S. nuclear arsenal untouched, while relying more heavily on working with allies in conventional war situations than current strategy allows for. It would mean that the military might take longer to deploy in large numbers to a conflict.

Option three “de-emphasizes use of U.S. military force in regional conflicts in favor of preserving U.S. control of the global commons (sea, air, space, and the Arctic), ensuring open access to the commons for allies and unimpeded global commerce.” In other words, Afghan- or Iraq-style boots-on-the-ground U.S. interventions would largely be avoided in favor of the use of long-range and “over-the-horizon” weapons like drones, naval blockades, the enforcement of no-fly zones, and the further arming and training of allies.

But looking more broadly at the question of what will make the world a safer place in an era of pandemics, climate change, racial injustice, and economic inequality, reductions well beyond the $1 trillion figure embedded in the CBO’s recommendations would be both necessary and possible in a more reasonable American world. The CBO’s scenarios remain focused on military methods for solving security problems, assuring an all-too-narrow view of what might be saved by a new approach to security.

NUCLEAR EXCESS

The CBO, for instance, chose not to look at possible savings from simply scaling back (not even ending) the Pentagon’s $2-trillion, three-decades-long plan to build a new generation of nuclear-armed missiles, bombers, and submarines, complete with accompanying new warheads. Scaling back such a buildup, which will only further imperil this planet, could easily save in excess of $100 billion over the next decade.

One significant step toward nuclear sanity would be to adopt the alternative nuclear posture proposed by the organization Global Zero. That would involve the elimination of all land-based nuclear missiles and rely instead on a smaller force of ballistic missile submarines and bombers as part of a “deterrence-only” strategy.

Land-based, intercontinental ballistic missiles were accurately described by former Secretary of Defense William Perry as “some of the most dangerous weapons in the world.” The reason: a president would have only a matter of minutes to decide whether to launch them upon being warned of an oncoming nuclear attack by an enemy power. That would, of course, greatly increase the risk of an accidental nuclear war and the potential destruction of the planet prompted by a false alarm (of which there have been several in the past). Eliminating such missiles would make the world a far safer place, while saving tens of billions of dollars in the process.

CAPPING CONTRACTORS

While most people think about the Pentagon budget in terms of what it

Last year, the Pentagon spent nearly $204 billion on service contracts – more than the budgets for the Departments of Health and Human Services, State, or Homeland Security.
spends on new guns, ships, planes, and missiles, services are about half of what it buys every year. These are the contracts that go to various corporate “Beltway bandits” to consult with the military or perform jobs that could often be done more cheaply by federal employees. Both the Defense Business Board and the Pentagon’s own cost estimating office have identified service contracting as an area where there are significant opportuni-
ties for large-scale savings.

Last year, the Pentagon spent nearly $204 billion on various service contracts. That’s more than the budgets for the Departments of Health and Human Services, State, or Homeland Security. Reducing spending on contractors by even 15% would instantly save tens of billions of dollars annually.

In the past, Congress and the Pentagon have shown that just such savings could easily be realized. For example, a provision in a 2011 defense law simply capped such spending at 2010 levels. Government spending data shows that, in the end, it was reduced by $42 billion over four years.

**CLOSING UNNEEDED BASES**

While the Biden administration seeks to expand domestic infrastructure spending, the Pentagon has been desperate to shed costly and unnecessary military facilities. Both the Obama and Trump administrations asked Congress to authorize another round of what’s called base realignment and closure to help the Defense Department get rid of its excess capacity. The Pentagon estimates that it could save $2 billion annually that way.

The CBO report cited above explicitly excludes any consideration of such cost savings as politically unfeasible, given the present Congress. But considering the ways in which climate change is going to threaten current military basing arrangements domestically and globally, that would be an obvious way to go.

Another CBO report warns that the future effects of climate change — from rising sea levels (and flooding coastlines) to ever more powerful storms — will both reduce the government’s revenue and increase its mandatory spending, if its base situation remains as it is now. After all, ever fiercer tropical storms and hurricanes, as well as rising levels of flooding, are already resulting in billions of dollars in damage to military bases. Meanwhile, it’s estimated that, in the decades to come, more than 1,700 U.S. military installations worldwide may be impacted by sea-level rise. Future rounds of base closings, both domestic and global, should be planned now with the impact of climate change in mind.

**TURNING AROUND CONGRESS, FIGHTING OFF LOBBYISTS**

So far, boosting Pentagon spending has been one of the only things a bipartisan majority of this Congress can agree on, as indicated by that House decision to add $25 billion to the Pentagon budget request for Fiscal Year 2022. A similar measure is included in the Senate version, which it will debate soon. There are, however, glimmers of hope on the horizon as the number of members of Congress willing to oppose the longstanding practice of shoveling ever more funds at the Pentagon, no questions asked, is indeed growing.

For example, a majority of Democrats and members of the leadership in the House of Representatives supported an ultimately unsuccessful provision to strip some excess funds from the Pentagon this year. A smaller group voted to cut the department’s budget across the board by 10%. Still, it was a number that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. That core group is only likely to grow in the years to come as the costs of non-military challenges like pandemics, climate change, and the financial impact of racial and economic injustice supplant traditional military risks as the most urgent threats to American lives and livelihoods.

Opposition to increased Pentagon spending is growing outside of Washington as well. An ever wider range of not just progressive but conservative organizations now support substantial reductions in the Pentagon budget. The challenge, however, is to translate such sentiments into a concerted, multifaceted campaign of public pressure that will move a majority of the members of Congress to stop giving the Pentagon a yearly blank check. A new poll from the Eurasia Group Foundation found that twice as many Americans now support cutting the Pentagon budget as support increasing it.

Any attempt to curb Pentagon spending will run up against a

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**In this century alone, the Pentagon has spent more than $14 trillion, up to one half of which has gone to contractors.**
strikingly powerful arms industry that deploys campaign contributions, lobbyists, and promises of defense-related employment to keep budgets high. In this century alone, the Pentagon has spent more than $14 trillion, up to one half of which has gone to contractors. During those same years, the arms industry has spent $285 million on campaign contributions and $2.5 billion on lobbying, most of which focused on members of the armed services and defense appropriations committees that take the lead in deciding how much the country spends for military purposes.

The arms industry’s lobbying efforts are especially insidious. In an average year, it employs around 700 lobbyists, more than one for every member of Congress. The top five corporate weapons makers got a return of $1,909 in taxpayer funds for every dollar they spent on lobbying. Most of their lobbyists once worked in the Pentagon or Congress and arrived in the world of arms contractors via the infamous “revolving door.” Of course, they then used their relationships with their former colleagues in government to curry favor for their corporate employers. A 2018 investigation by the Project On Government Oversight found that, in the prior decade, 380 high-ranking Pentagon officials and military officers had become lobbyists, board members, executives, or consultants for weapons contractors within two years of leaving their government jobs.

A September 2021 study by the Government Accountability Office found that, as of 2019, the top 14 arms contractors employed more than 1,700 former military or Pentagon civilian employees, including many who had previously been involved in making or enforcing the rules for buying major weapons systems.

The revolving door spins both ways, with executives and board members of the major weapons makers moving into powerful senior positions in government where they’re well situated to help their former (and, more than likely, future) employers. The process starts at the top. Four of the past five secretaries of defense have also been executives, lobbyists, or board members of Raytheon, Boeing, or General Dynamics, three of the top five weapons makers that split tens of billions of dollars in Pentagon contracts annually. Both the House and Senate versions of the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act extend the periods of time in which those entering the government from such industries have to recuse themselves from decisions involving their former companies. Still, as long as the Pentagon continues to pluck officials from the very outfits driving those exploding budgets, we should all know more or less what to expect.

So far, the system is working — if you happen to be an arms contractor. The top five weapons companies alone split $166 billion in Pentagon contracts in Fiscal Year 2020, nearly one and one-half times the $52.5 billion allocated for the State Department and the Agency for International Development combined.

WHICH WAY FORWARD?
The Congressional Budget Office’s new report charts a path toward a more rational approach to Pentagon spending, but the $1 trillion in savings it proposes should only be a starting point. Hundreds of billions more could be saved over the next decade by reassessing our national security strategy, cutting back the Pentagon’s nuclear buildup, capping its use of private contractors, and scaling back the colossal sums of waste, fraud, and abuse baked into its budget. All of this could be done while making this country and the world a significantly safer place by shifting such funds to

Four of the past five secretaries of defense have also been executives, lobbyists, or board members of Raytheon, Boeing, or General Dynamics.

A version of this piece can be found at pogo.org/1-trillion-cut/

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The Project On Government Oversight (POGO) is a nonpartisan independent watchdog that investigates and exposes waste, corruption, abuse of power, and when the government fails to serve the public or silences those who report wrongdoing. We champion reforms to achieve a more effective, ethical, and accountable federal government that safeguards constitutional principles.

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