

Summer Budget Blockbuster

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President Trump declared at the end of February that his 2018 budget will bring a “historic increase in defense spending to rebuild the depleted military of the United States of America.” While this is welcome news for those who have watched the Air Force suffer through years of insufficient funding, Trump’s budget ideas immediately came under attack from all sides.

Some immediately noted the increase fell well short of a promised 10 percent boost. Trump proposed increasing DOD’s budget from \$584 billion approved for 2017 to \$603 billion next year—a three percent rise. (The 10 percent figure was measured against sequestration limits, a budget ceiling that remains the law of the land but has been bypassed every year since 2013.)

Meanwhile, nondefense spending would be cut by the same \$54 billion defense was slated to receive. Budget offsets smartly prevent huge deficit increases, but the money would be pulled from other departments. This will be spending Trump criticized in the past, which will bring fire from the left. For example, “the President is surrendering America’s leadership in innovation, education, science, and clean energy,” claimed House Minority Leader Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.).

The State Department could see its funding slashed by 30 percent, a troubling cut. Without effective diplomacy and development programs, the US would increasingly rely on the military to solve overseas problems—when they are more expensive, difficult, and deadly. As Defense Secretary James N. Mattis told lawmakers when he led US Central Command, “If you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition.”

Defense hawks blasted DOD’s increase as too meager. “We can and should do more than this level of funding will allow,” said Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-Texas), House Armed Services Committee chairman. “The administration will have to make clear which problems facing our military they are choosing not to fix.”

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), Senate Armed Services Committee chairman, added, “A defense budget of \$640 billion is required in Fiscal Year 2018 as a first step toward restoring military readiness, rebuilding our military, and reshaping our

forces for the realities of 21st century warfare.” If enacted, \$640 billion really would be a 10 percent year-to-year increase.

When a budget increase does come, where does the money go? Trump has criticized NATO, said US allies must pay more for their defense or risk losing US protection, and has downplayed the Russian threat. Other top defense officials have said essentially the opposite.

“It is not clear to me why we would need 355 ships if our foreign policy says we are going to reduce our commitments around the world and let allies do more for their own defense,” Center for Strategic and International Studies budget guru Todd Harrison told *The New York Times*. “If you want to build a military more suited to deter Russia and China than to deter terrorists, it is a very different capability that you want to buy.”

This year’s funding battles promise to be epic.

The administration is just now embarking on new national security strategy and nuclear posture reviews. Do not expect them to recommend an Air Force that does any less for the nation.

A three percent budget increase does not suddenly yield improved counterterrorism skills, better high-end capabilities, rebuilt readiness, and increased end strength. It is, at best, a down payment. How the money is spent is critically important—it cannot go to pork barrel projects, pet programs, across the board increases, or (worst of all) long-term unfunded mandates.

At AFA’s March Air Warfare Symposium in Orlando, Fla., top USAF officials touted manpower. Acting Air Force Secretary Lisa S. Disbrow cited personnel shortfalls in “maintainers, pilots, acquisition and contracting personnel, cyber experts, and software coders” as part of the reason the service must grow from 317,000 airmen to 350,000—just to fill empty positions. The nuclear enterprise still needs strengthening, and remotely piloted aircraft positions remain undermanned.

Modernization requirements are also diverse. The F-35 strike fighter, KC-46 tanker, and B-21 bomber are at different acquisition stages, but must stay on schedule or be accelerated if possible. The ICBM fleet and nuclear command and control infrastructure need replacement. There are severe weapons shortages to address. The JSTARS battle management aircraft needs recapitalization, and USAF needs to take a hard look at buying an inexpensive light attack aircraft.

This summer’s budget battles will be intense and emotional, as competing philosophies are debated in public. But even after the administration and Congress agree on the totals and where the dollars come from, they can’t just throw money at defense. The nation must still get the Air Force budget right.



A three percent budget increase won’t suddenly rebuild readiness.