

What It Means To Be No. 1

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The United States, unlike any other nation, is a global power with worldwide interests, responsibilities, and allies.

"Apparently, the US spends more per year [on defense] than the next 15 countries combined," Donald H. Rumsfeld wrote on Jan. 3.

In a memo to his top aides, the evidently surprised Defense Secretary noted that the US last year devoted \$456 billion to the military, while the nations ranked No. 2 (China) through 16 (Israel) together shelled out only \$454 billion.

Rumsfeld wasn't necessarily unhappy to learn that the US was so dominant. Yet he cautioned, "It is useful to keep this in mind."

If senior US officials spend any time at all worrying about this kind of thing, that will become a problem in itself.

The nation is engaged in two simultaneous struggles. It is now fighting to defeat a collection of vicious enemies abroad. At the same time, it is working to keep up a modern, well-trained force able to counter big-power threats of the future.

Americans don't have the option of choosing one over the other. They must attend to both.

The Pentagon's latest budget proposal, out this month, seeks expenditures of about \$443 billion in 2007, not counting the expense of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. When that cost is added in later this year, the budget will hover at about \$500 billion.

These amounts stir political sensitivities at a time of huge budget deficits. A recent poll for the Pew Research Center found 42 percent of Americans gave "top priority" to reducing the \$319 billion deficit. Thirty-six percent wanted to do so by cutting defense spending.

Right on cue, the New York Times chimed in, "After the Pentagon's spending orgy over the past five years, there is plenty of scope for cutting."

Clearly, meeting US military needs will be hard enough without high-ranking insiders raising irrelevant budgetary points.

And Rumsfeld's point—made over and over by defense critics before he ever took it up—is indeed irrelevant. One wonders why he mentioned it at all. US defense spending does exceed that of the next 15 nations. The obvious question is: So what?

The 15 countries in question—China, Russia, France, Britain, Japan, Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia, India, South Korea, Spain, Australia, Canada, Turkey, and Israel—have small economies, compared to us. As a group, their GDP totals \$17 trillion. The United States GDP, by itself, is nearly as great—approaching \$13 trillion. One would expect

comparable defense spending levels.

There are other, more significant factors that make the United States the No. 1 spender.

Start with the obvious strategic considerations. The United States, unlike any other nation, is a global power with worldwide interests, responsibilities, and allies. No other nation would be called on to extend its deterrent power around the world or would even want to. None have the power to fight and win two major regional wars at a time. Only Washington can do that.

Indeed, the scale of US military might enables some other major nations—Germany, say, or Japan—to be relaxed about their own defenses.

Another factor to consider: Americans have decided that, if war comes, it will be waged far from US shores. That decision imposes certain military demands, all of them expensive.

Fighting far from home requires lots and lots of transport—especially airlift—to haul bullets, beans, parts, and troops. It also requires costly overseas bases. Because every war they fight is an “away game” in an enemy’s backyard, US combat forces can’t be just a little stronger; they must be much stronger—in the air, on land, or at sea—and that requires high-technology weapons.

It also requires a huge amount of combat support. At present, about 50 percent of USAF’s budget goes to so-called “joint force enablers”—tankers, satellites, and surveillance aircraft.

Much of today’s defense cost flows from the kind of force to which we Americans have committed ourselves psychologically. It is an all-volunteer force, not conscripted. Attracting and keeping high-quality personnel costs a fortune—\$111 billion a year just for pay—and grows more expensive each year. Health care costs and other benefits have been soaring.

Such a professional combat force, in turn, requires extensive, realistic training, which pushes up outlays on fuel, spare parts, repairs, and depot labor. The US military spends \$150 billion a year on these accounts, twice as much as it spends on weapons.

US defense spending also is shaped by two nonsystemic factors. First, the US is at war. In a paper published Jan. 4, Steven Kosiak of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments reports that Congress has approved \$302 billion for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. (The costs of the Korean and Vietnam Wars were \$445 billion and \$635 billion, respectively.)

Second, the US took a “procurement holiday” in the 1990s, deferring acquisition of new systems, so weapons are now wearing out all at once and are in urgent need of replacement.

A bigger point to make is this: Even today’s relatively high level of defense spending imposes no undue burden on Americans or their economy. The best measure of “affordability” is not the amount of dollars spent, but rather the percent of GDP that a nation devotes to its military equipment and operations, and that figure is near a historic low.

In a Nov. 21 memo, Adm. Edmund P. Giambastiani Jr., vice chairman of the JCS, raised that issue with Rumsfeld. “A common comparison of defense spending cited in the press is that, in absolute terms, the US spends more than the next ‘X’ countries combined,” he wrote. He pointed out that, at 3.8 percent of GDP, the US ranked no

better than 29th.

In other words, we stand just behind Belarus (3.9), just ahead of Morocco (3.7), and dead even with Tanzania. As Rumsfeld himself might say, it is useful to keep this in mind.

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