
Defense Report

AUSA



The National Defense Budget—It Shouldn't Become a Scapegoat

In passing the Defense Appropriation Act for fiscal 1984, Congress reflected the conviction of the public that we cannot continue to be complacent in the face of increasing threats to national security. It recognizes a requirement for a continued steadfast national commitment to support national defense needs; and forces and equipment to protect those interests.

This translates into funds to build and maintain defense forces based on what Congress believes is affordable, not what is needed. Still, critics attack such expenditures as wasteful. They speak of the defense budget as a monster, out of control, devouring the national treasure. These critics would use the myth that defense costs have risen more rapidly than other elements of the budget as a method of justifying drastic reductions when, in reality, national defense has not in recent years been the prime mover in budget growth.

In the last 15 years the total U.S. budget has quadrupled while defense doubled—social and economic programs increased 14-fold and the rate of entitlement growth was twice that of the budget as a whole. Defense is not the culprit, and its share of the total budget, which has hovered between 23 percent and 28 percent since 1981 is certainly appropriate when one evaluates the worldwide interests and responsibilities which must be protected and supported by our military forces.

As a share of the gross national product in recent years, defense spending reached a peak of about nine percent in 1964, fell to about five percent in 1978 and has risen slowly to 6.8 percent for 1984. Some growth was necessary to pay for the lean years following Vietnam, and we are now devoting a slightly more realistic share to defense.

This, indeed, is supportive of our national interest and like all government programs, it should be subject to critical evaluation. But the defense budget should not be used as a political whipping boy. For if we do not maintain both our economic strength and our defense strength, there are those who are always willing, by force of arms if necessary, to threaten our allies and the resources now so essential to our free existence.