

Obama proposes increased defense spending

Tom Eley
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Last week US Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates unveiled a multiyear military budget proposal that would increase spending in 2011 by 1 percent, to \$553 billion, and outstrip inflation each year until 2015 and 2016, when it would ostensibly be held flat.

Presented in the media as “frugal” and an “austerity” budget, the proposal would actually maintain military spending in real terms at all-time post-World War II highs.

Nor did Gates’ plan include a separate \$120 billion request to fund the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for another year that will bring the overall defense budget to \$773 billion. The “contingency funding” request, reported by Politico, was made in a closed-door meeting with top Congressional leaders last week. The new figure is more than double the amount projected by the Obama administration last year, when it estimated that only \$50 billion would be needed.

The Gates plan, which must be approved by Congress, is also based on “fuzzy math,” as one defense analyst put it. Most of the \$78 billion in reduced spending for next year had already been imposed by Obama through his freeze on federal employee pay increases, which affects Defense Department civilian employees but not military personnel. Much of the remainder of the anticipated savings comes from the proposal assuming that military goods will be less expensive than previously estimated.

Among other spending increases, the budget proposal would expand the deployment of unmanned remote-controlled drones that have inflicted heavy civilian casualties in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, modernize the Army’s tanks, and provide new ships and jets for the Navy.

“This is no starvation diet,” the *Chicago Tribune* admits. “The United States military will continue to operate at a level of funding and capability that other nations can only envy.”

The US currently accounts for more than 40 percent of the world’s arms expenditures. Defense spending absorbs about 4.7 percent of gross domestic product—by far the most for the world’s major economies—and over 50 percent of discretionary spending. Not counting the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, in 2010 Congress spent ten times more on the Defense Department than the Department of Education, 50 times more than the Environmental Protection Agency, and about 100 times more than the Army Corps of Engineers. The combined budget deficit of all 50 states over the past four fiscal years—shortfalls that have been used to carry out sweeping attacks on social spending—is about half what the US military would receive next year in Gates’ proposal.

Gates’ plan, which has the backing of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen and the heads of the four branches of the military, will see certain cuts implemented. In line with his strategic vision of creating a military that can be rapidly deployed on several fronts simultaneously—an agenda shared by his predecessor as defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld—Gates proposes cuts to a handful of projects that analysts believe will have little practical use, such as the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, a \$14 billion dollar boondoggle for defense contractor General Dynamics.

Gates also proposed cuts to force levels in the Army and Marine Corps of 27,000 and 20,000, respectively, beginning in 2015. But these would be contingent on a successful drawdown in Afghanistan—and on the US not invading any other countries in the interim.

Even these largely symbolic cuts have raised the ire of politicians from both parties whose districts might lose defense projects, but particularly the Republicans, who accuse the Obama administration of compromising “national security.” Howard “Buck” McKeon, a California Republican and chair of the House Armed

Services Committee, said the reduction in spending increases would “leave our military less capable and less ready to fight,” and called it “a dramatic shift for a nation at war and a dangerous signal from the commander in chief.”

Gates is himself a Republican, first appointed to his position by George W. Bush and held over by Obama.

Some Democrats and fiscal conservatives argue that the defense budget, consuming as it does the lion’s share of discretionary spending, is one of the few areas where savings can be realized. This outlook was articulated by the proposal from Obama’s bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility last month to reduce military spending by \$150 billion in the coming years. This approximately 20 percent cut to the US war machine would be far outweighed by the commission’s proposal to cut trillions in Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and other forms of social spending.

There is an overwhelming consensus among Democrats and Republicans that the military budget cannot be seriously reduced. With the decades-long erosion of American economic influence on the global stage—a process accelerated by the financial collapse of 2008—Washington relies ever more heavily on its military to achieve its strategic aims. At the same time, the military has become a powerful force in the political affairs of the nation, with an officer corps steeped in Christian fundamentalism, extreme right politics and contemptuous of civilian rule. This military must ultimately be relied upon as the enforcer of the drastic attack being carried out against working class living standards.

This explains Obama’s cowering before the military. When he implemented his multiyear freeze on discretionary federal spending after his first year in office, Obama exempted the bloated Pentagon budget, leaving social spending to absorb the full blow of austerity. And when Obama ordered a pay freeze on all federal government employees in December, he exempted military personnel.

Fifty years ago this week, in his last speech as president, Dwight Eisenhower warned the US public of the “grave implications” posed to democracy by the “military industrial complex.”

“The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every Statehouse, every

office of the Federal government,” Eisenhower warned. “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes.”

The Gates proposal to increase the enormous amount of military spending currently in place, in spite of the deepest social crisis in generations, demonstrates that Eisenhower’s fears have been more than realized.



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