



OPINION  
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# We Must Stop Showering the Military With Money

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Last month, Senator Joe Manchin, the West Virginia Democrat who has frustrated much of President Biden’s policy agenda, released a [statement](#) confirming what he’d been hinting for weeks. He [would not vote](#) for the Build Back Better Act, the Democrats’ \$2.2 trillion 10-year plan to address climate change and invest in child care, health care and education. Manchin argued it would increase inflation, harm the electricity grid and hamper national security and was simply just too “mammoth” and “sweeping” to support.

“I have always said, ‘If I can’t go back home and explain it, I can’t vote for it,’” he [said](#).

I don’t doubt the political wisdom of Manchin’s pledge to support only what he can explain. I do wonder, though, how he applies his maxim to a far more mammoth, more sweeping piece of the federal budget: the nearly three-quarters of a trillion dollars that we are spending this year on a military that has become the [epitome of governmental dysfunction, self-dealing](#) and overspending.

Of course, I’m only kidding. I don’t actually wonder about Manchin’s stance on showering the Department of Defense with more money than it asks for, even [more than it seems to know what to do with](#). Right after the time he was bayoneting Build Back Better, [Manchin](#) joined 87 other senators — Democrats and Republicans — in rubber-stamping another [gargantuan budget](#) for the Pentagon. They allocated \$768 billion for the military in 2022, roughly \$24 billion more than the White House requested from Congress.

Given all the challenges we face at home, does it make any sense to keep spending so many hundreds of billions on the Pentagon? And even just in terms of fighting wars, can anyone be satisfied with the way the military is managing its funds? The Pentagon has never passed an audit and says it may not be [able to until 2028](#).

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In 2020 the U.S. military’s budget accounted for [almost 40 percent](#) of the world’s military expenditures. This level of spending has long been excessive, but after a pandemic that has claimed the lives of more Americans than [any war we fought](#), continuing to throw money at the military is an act of willful disregard for the most urgent threats we face.

According to a [projection by the Congressional Budget Office](#), Congress is projected to spend about \$8.5 trillion for the military over the next decade — about half a trillion more than is budgeted for all nonmilitary discretionary programs combined (a category that [includes](#) federal spending on education, public health, scientific research, infrastructure, national parks and forests, environmental protection, law enforcement, courts, tax collection, foreign aid, homeland security and health care for veterans).

You don’t have to be a pacifist to wonder if this imbalance between military and nonmilitary spending makes sense. When we face so many other major challenges — from climate disasters to political instability and insurrection — shouldn’t we ask whether it remains wise to keep handing the military what is effectively a blank check? Are such lavish resources even good for national defense, or might the Pentagon’s near-bottomless access to funds have encouraged a [culture of waste](#) and indulgence that made it easier to blunder into Iraq and contributed to its failures in [Afghanistan](#)?

This gets to what’s most frustrating about the Pentagon’s enormous budget: the halo of protection it enjoys in our political culture. Despite the Pentagon’s numerous missteps, our representatives too rarely ask how much money for the military may be way too much money for the military. We have long national debates about [whether it makes sense to spend on things like parental leave](#) or college tuition, but lawmakers seldom expect such rigor from the Defense Department. For example, why should we [keep building aircraft carriers](#) — each of which costs [about \\$1.5 billion a year to operate](#) — when we’ve already got most of the world’s fleet of active aircraft carriers? (We’ve got 11; no other nation has more than two, though China may be [launching a third](#) soon.)

There is ample evidence that Congress’s reluctance to ask basic questions of the Pentagon has harmed, rather than helped, the military’s effectiveness. Consider the boondoggle that is the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program — the plan the Pentagon conceived [in the 1990s](#) to build a new plane, which is expected to cost taxpayers [more than \\$1 trillion](#) over its 60-year life span. A [recent audit](#) from the Government Accountability Office found that even the Pentagon’s extended timeline for when the plane might finally go into full production is “not achievable,” and there were more than 850 “open deficiencies” in the project as of November 2020. I wonder if Manchin could explain to his constituents how tolerating such a level of mismanagement is good for our security.

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I also wonder if Manchin could explain the staggering size and top-heaviness of the Pentagon’s staffing — why the [ratio of enlisted troops to officers is declining](#) across the U.S. forces, [cluttering the chain of command](#) with layers of bureaucracy. A 2015 internal study found that the Pentagon [employed](#) (or hired contractors to employ) nearly as many deskbound, back-office people as it had active-duty troops. The report found that it could save \$125 billion a year by, among other measures, reducing overstaffing through retirements and attrition. The Pentagon buried that report, [according to The Washington Post](#).

Not only do lawmakers give the Pentagon a free pass on its budget; sometimes they even force the agency to keep the little fat it’s trying to trim. The Air Force says that it’s ready to retire its fleet of A-10 Warthogs, fighter airplanes that date back to the 1970s. Congress [forbade any such reduction](#) in 2022.

Starting in 2017, Congress even required each military service to submit [an annual wish list of “unfunded priorities”](#) — that is, goodies that the services might want but that the White House had not requested in its budget. It has since become routine for Congress to not only give the Pentagon [much of what it asks for](#) but also ladle on [extras](#).

The reasons such spending persists aren’t a big mystery. [The military-industrial complex is every bit as politically powerful as Dwight Eisenhower warned it would be](#). (A recent Wall Street Journal headline [captured the situation well](#): “Who Won in Afghanistan? Private Contractors.”) In another trick, the military spends its contracts to a [large number of congressional districts](#), giving every lawmaker a reason to celebrate excessive military spending. ([Manchin put out a statement](#) taking credit for all the benefits the new defense appropriation will bring to West Virginia.)

And finally, there is plain patriotic posturing: Because every dollar to the Pentagon can be defended as protecting the troops and the nation’s security, no politician will ever get in trouble for giving too much money to the military.

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Mandy Smithberger, who studies Pentagon excess at the Project on Government Oversight, a nonpartisan independent group, told me that while she has hopes that younger generations will begin to question the military’s excessive spending, the situation is unlikely to change anytime soon.

“It’s going to take members of Congress to really step up,” she said. That seems about as likely as pigs flying — or, more aptly, F-35s.

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