

## war stories

### Trimming the Fat

How to put the military budget on a diet.

By Fred Kaplan

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To grasp the magnitude of President Bush's [\\$420.7 billion military budget request](#), which he submitted to Congress on Monday, let's compare it with the military budget for 1968, the peak year of the Vietnam War. Adjusted for inflation, the budget that year—when a half-million soldiers were fighting in Southeast Asia *and* a garrison of armored divisions in Europe were still facing Soviet forces along the East-West German border—totaled \$428 billion.

It's remarkable enough that Bush's budget seems to be only slightly smaller than that earlier wartime budget, but in fact it's much larger. For Lyndon Johnson's budget included—in fact, was dominated by—the cost of fighting in Vietnam. Bush's budget includes *none* of the cost of fighting in Iraq. That will be covered in a supplemental, which Bush will request from Congress after the November election.

Officials guess the supplemental will be around \$50 billion (the one for this year was \$65 billion), but even if it turns out to be just half that sum, the Fiscal Year 2005 military budget will be (again, adjusted for inflation) [the largest U.S. military budget since 1952](#)—the peak of the Korean War—and the second-largest since World War II.

It is hard to say which is more remarkable—this calculation or the fact that nobody seems to mind.

Yes, we live in a dangerous world. Yes, we must support our troops with decent pay and the finest hardware. Yes, an uncertain future requires us to maintain an adequate technical and industrial base. But does even a conservative extrapolation of these mandates require spending nearly half a trillion dollars?

An enormous portion of this military budget, quite plainly, has nothing to do with Iraq, al-Qaida, the spectrum of new threats, or the American military's new doctrine of "transformation" and lighter, more mobile forces. Here are some [examples](#):

**Stealth aircraft.** The Air Force wants \$4.1 billion to buy 24 F-22 Raptor "stealth" planes, while the Air Force and the Navy together are requesting another \$4.6 billion for research and development of a still newer stealth Joint Strike Fighter. Stealth planes are designed with exotic materials and rounded edges that reduce their visibility to enemy radar—and thus make them less vulnerable to anti-air missiles. This attribute, obviously, comes in handy. On the first night of the last two Gulf wars, F-117 stealth planes penetrated Iraqi air space and launched surprise strikes on key targets—including air-defense batteries—thus paving the way for follow-on echelons of non-stealth attack aircraft.

But the key question Congress should ask is: How much stealth do we need? The Air Force and Navy currently have about 75 stealth planes. Do they really need more? Almost no non-stealthy American airplanes (except for helicopters) have been shot down in recent wars, nor are they likely to be shot down in wars of the foreseeable future. Extremely cheap and reliable "smart bombs" (such as the satellite-guided JDAMs, which the Air Force and the Navy are buying in [reassuringly ample quantities](#)) can now be dropped with great precision from planes flying at 10,000 feet—an altitude well beyond the range of anti-aircraft fire.\* Who needs to spend all this money for stealth when gravity provides enough protection?

More puzzling still, these new stealth planes are designed primarily for long-range air-to-air combat. Except perhaps for Israel and France, there is not a country in the world that has an air force remotely competitive with U.S. air forces—in personnel, training, or inventory. Of course, this may not stay true for decades to come, but it's wasteful to spend billions now for threats that, at worst, lie way, way beyond the horizon.

**Ships and submarines.** For the third year in a row, the Navy wants \$2.5 billion to build a new Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarine. It also wants \$3.6 billion for three new Arleigh Burke-class destroyers and \$1.5 billion for a new DD(X) surface combatant ship. These may be nice to have, but—unlike the Army, whose troops truly are stretched thin—the Navy has no gaps in its coverage of strategic sea lanes, especially since there's no other country in the world that has a navy worth the name. The U.S. Navy currently has 55 perfectly capable nuclear-powered attack subs. The only mystery is what their crews do when they go out on patrol. They don't track Soviet subs like they did in the old days, and they don't play cat-and-mouse games with enemy anti-submarine-warfare assets for the simple reason that there are no naval enemies and, if there were, they don't have ASW assets. Similar questions can be directed to much of the U.S. surface fleet.

The United States has spent a lot of money over the years on submarine technology, and it should continue spending some money to maintain that technical base. But that doesn't require spending billions to build more and more vessels.

**Comanche helicopters.** The Army wants \$1.2 billion to continue developing its long-troubled Comanche scout-and-reconnaissance chopper. Helicopters were the one class of weapons that [did poorly](#) in the last Iraq war. Since the Comanche began its R & D process well over a decade ago, the Army and other services have fielded several high-tech drones equipped with video cameras that transmit real-time imagery to commanders. They do the same job more effectively, cheaply, and safely. The FY05 budget includes \$600 million to buy 17 new Global Hawk, Predator, and Shadow drones—in addition to the 65 purchased the previous two years—and \$2 billion on R & D for future models.

**Missile defense.** President Bush is asking \$10.7 billion—a 10 percent hike over this year's \$9.6 billion—for his much-cherished program to shoot down a rogue state's nuclear missiles as they dart toward our shores. Missile defense is now the military's single largest money sponge. The Pentagon's director of testing says the program has not yet come close to proving its effectiveness. Officials at the Missile Defense Agency acknowledge that the architecture for a multilayered defense system has yet to be worked out. Several scientific panels (including several

apolitical ones) have concluded that the program's whole mission lies beyond the realm of real science. (Click [here](#) for a bunch of columns that elaborate on these points.) Bush is set to deploy the first 20 antimissile missiles by next year. It's premature, to say the least. Cutting the program back to a \$3 billion R & D venture—roughly what Presidents Reagan and Clinton were spending—would not be unreasonable.

These are just a few ideas. A hard scrub of the budget would uncover many more. For all the (quite legitimate) talk about new types of threats and the need for new types of forces to counter them, the FY05 military budget—in its broad contours and blue-chip weapons systems—looks a lot like a Cold War budget, except that Cold War budgets were smaller.

**Correction, Feb. 4, 2004:** *This piece originally said 10,000 feet was beyond the range of any surface-to-air missiles. In recent wars, the first waves of U.S. aircraft and cruise missiles have destroyed the radar and launch sites of the enemy's high-altitude surface-to-air missiles. After that point, flying 10,000 feet puts U.S. planes beyond the range of mobile SAMs and anti-air artillery, which have much shorter range. In any case, in the 1999 Kosovo war and the 2003 Iraq war, only one U.S. combat plane was shot down. Ironically, it was an F-117 stealth fighter. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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Official press releases and news articles about this subject can be confusing because they toss around inconsistent numbers. There is the "Defense budget" (meaning the portion of the budget appropriated to the Department of Defense), and there is the "military budget" (meaning the Defense budget plus the amount given to the Department of Energy for nuclear weapons and related activities). The FY2005 budget request amounts to \$401.7 billion for the DoD plus \$19 billion for DoE activities—\$420.7 billion in all.

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The Air Force is requesting \$522 million for 22,137 JDAMs (which stands for Joint Defense Attack Munitions). The Navy wants \$155 million for 6,620 of them. In the previous two years, both services together spent a bit less than \$1.5 billion for 68,198 of the munitions, many of which were used in the Iraq war. This does not include similar sums spent for other types of "smart bombs." For more on the subject, click [here](#).

Fred Kaplan writes the "War Stories" column for *Slate*.

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