**Actual National Security Budget Is
Nearly Twice as Much as Announced Budget**

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At $1.21 trillion, the actual national security budget is almost twice the size of the announced Pentagon budget.

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Hold on to your helmets! It’s true the White House is reporting that its proposed new Pentagon budget is *only* $740.5 billion, a relatively small increase from the previous year’s staggering number. In reality, however, when you also include war and security costs buried in the budgets of other agencies, the actual national security figure comes in at more than $1.2 trillion, as the Trump administration continues to give the Pentagon free reign over taxpayer dollars.

You would think that the country’s congressional representatives might want to take control of this process and roll back that budget — especially given the way the White House has [repeatedly violated](https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/01/28/democrats-promote-defense-industry-line-in-letter-to-trump-decrying-border-wall-spending/) its constitutional authority by essentially stealing billions of dollars from the Defense Department for the president’s “Great Wall” (that Congress refused to fund). Recently, even some of the usual congressional [Pentagon budget boosters](https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/02/07/wall-funding-shifts-making-lawmakers-skeptical-military-budget-congressman-says.html) have begun to lament how difficult it is to take the Department’s requests for more money seriously, given the way the military continues to demand yet more (ever more expensive) weaponry and advanced technologies on the ([largely bogus](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/theworldpost/wp/2018/08/22/us-china-3/)) grounds that Uncle Sam is losing an innovation war with Russia and China.

And if this wasn’t bad enough, keep in mind that the Defense Department remains the only major federal agency that has proven itself incapable of even passing an audit. An [investigation](https://www.pogo.org/analysis/2019/12/the-pentagon-war-on-transparency/) by my colleague Jason Paladino at the Project On Government Oversight found that increased secrecy around the operations of the Pentagon is making it ever more difficult to assess whether any of its money is well spent, which is why it’s important to track where all the money in this country’s national security budget actually goes.

**The Pentagon’s “Base” Budget**

This year’s Pentagon request includes $636.4 billion for what’s called its “base” budget — for the routine expenses of the Defense Department. However, claiming that those funds were insufficient, Congress and the Pentagon created a separate slush fund to cover both actual war expenses and other items on their wish lists (on which more to come). Add in mandatory spending, which includes payments to veterans’ retirement and illness compensation funds and that base budget comes to $647.2 billion.

Ahead of the recent budget roll out, the Pentagon issued a [review](https://media.defense.gov/2020/Feb/06/2002244621/-1/-1/1/FY-2021-DEFENSE-WIDE-REVIEW-FINAL.PDF) of potential “reforms” to supposedly cut or control soaring costs. While a few of them deserve serious consideration and debate, the majority reveal just how focused the Pentagon is on protecting its own interests. Ironically, one major area of investment it wants to slash involves oversight of the billions of dollars to be spent. Perhaps least surprising was a proposal to slash programs for operational testing and evaluation — otherwise known as the process of determining whether the billions Americans spend on shiny new weaponry will result in products that actually work. The Pentagon’s Office of Operational Test and Evaluation has found itself repeatedly [under attack](https://www.pogo.org/investigation/2014/08/independent-weapons-testing-comes-under-fire-again/) from arms manufacturers and their boosters who would prefer to be in charge of grading their own performances.

Reduced oversight becomes even more troubling when you look at where Pentagon policymakers want to move that money — to missile defense based on staggeringly expensive futuristic [hypersonic weaponry](https://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176611/tomgram%3A_rajan_menon%2C_the_hypersonic_race_to_hell). As my Project On Government Oversight colleague Mark Thompson [has written](https://www.pogo.org/analysis/2019/02/putting-the-hype-in-hypersonic-weapons/), the idea that such weapons will offer a successful way of defending against enemy missiles “is a recipe for military futility and fiscal insanity.”

Another proposal — to cut [A-10](https://www.janes.com/article/94256/pentagon-budget-2021-us-air-force-again-pursuing-a-10-cuts) “Warthogs” in the Pentagon’s arsenal in pursuit of a new generation of fighter planes — suggests just how cavalier a department eager for flashy new toys that mean large paydays for the giant defense contractors can be with service members’ lives. After all, no weapons platform more effectively protects ground troops at a [relatively low cost](https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/01/a-10-f-35-air-force-budget/) than the A-10, yet that plane regularly ends up on the cut list, thanks to those eager to make money on a predictably less effective and [vastly more expensive](https://www.pogo.org/analysis/2016/04/senator-demands-clarification-about-f-35s-close-air-support-role/) replacement.

Many other proposed “cuts” are actually gambits to get Congress to pump yet more money into the Pentagon. For instance, a memo of supposed cuts to shipbuilding programs, [leaked](https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/01/07/lawmakers-protest-proposed-cuts-to-shipbuilding/) at the end of last year, drew predictable ire from members of Congress trying to protect jobs in their states. Similarly, don’t imagine for a second that purchases of Lockheed Martin’s [F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi58KCd9c7nAhXEmXIEHRg_BjUQFjAAegQIBRAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pogo.org%2Finvestigation%2F2019%2F03%2Ff-35-far-from-ready-to-face-current-or-future-threats%2F&usg=AOvVaw1EjSzxbEXf6lvN4HBI3HBs), the most expensive weapons system in history, could possibly be slowed even though the latest testing report suggests that, among other things, it has a gun that still [can’t shoot straight](https://time.com/5774422/f-35-military-jet-assessment/). That program is, however, a pork paradise for the military-industrial complex, claiming jobs spread across [45 states](https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-trump-tweet-lockheed-martin-f35-20161212-story.html).

Many such proposals for cuts are nothing but deft deployments of the “[Washington Monument strategy](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2013/02/19/the-washington-monument-sequester-strategy/),” a classic tactic in which bureaucrats suggest slashing popular programs to avoid facing any cuts at all. The bureaucratic game is fairly simple: Never offer up anything that would actually appeal to Congress when it comes to reducing the bottom line. Recently, the Pentagon did exactly that in [proposing cuts](https://www.defensenews.com/breaking-news/2020/02/13/pentagon-seeks-to-cut-f-35s-other-equipment-to-pay-for-trumps-border-wall/) to popular weapons programs to pay for the president’s wall, knowing that no such thing would happen.

Believe it or not, however, there are actually a few proposed cuts that Congress might take seriously. Lockheed Martin’s and Austal’s Littoral Combat Ship program, for instance, has long been [troubled](https://www.pogo.org/investigation/2016/12/overhaul-of-littoral-combat-ship-program-likely-to-increase-risks-and-costs/), and the number of ships planned for purchase has been cut as problems operating such vessels or even ensuring that they might survive in combat have mounted. The Navy estimates that retiring the first four ships in the program, which would otherwise need significant and expensive upgrades to be deployable, would save [$1.2 billion](https://news.usni.org/2020/02/10/navys-new-shipbuilding-plan-dead-on-arrival-lawmakers-say).

**The Pentagon’s Slush Fund: the Overseas Contingency Operations Account**

Both the Pentagon and Congress have used a war-spending slush fund known as the Overseas Contingency Operations account, or OCO, as a mechanism to circumvent budget caps put into place in [2011](https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44519.pdf) by the Budget Control Act. In 2021, that slush fund is expected to come in at $69 billion. As Taxpayers for Common Sense has pointed out, if OCO were an agency in itself, it would be the [fourth largest](https://www.taxpayer.net/budget-appropriations-tax/oco-is-fourth-largest-agency/) in the government. In a welcome move towards transparency, this year’s request actually notes that $16 billion of its funds are for things that should be paid for by the base budget, just as last year’s OCO spending levels included $8 billion for the president’s false fund-the-wall “national emergency.”

Overseas Contingency Operations total: $69 billion

Running tally: $716.2 billion.

**The Nuclear Budget**

While most people may associate the Department of Energy with fracking, oil drilling, solar panels, and wind farms, more than half of its budget actually goes to the National Nuclear Security Administration, which manages the country’s nuclear weapons program. Unfortunately, it has an even worse record than the Pentagon when it comes to mismanaging the tens of billions of dollars it receives every year. Its programs are regularly significantly behind schedule and over cost, more than [$28 billion](https://www.pogo.org/investigation/2018/05/nuke-agency-needs-budget-accountability/) in such expenses over the past 20 years. It’s a track record of mismanagement woeful enough to leave even the [White House’s budget geeks](https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2020/01/23/in-nuclear-spending-fight-its-trump-allies-vs-white-house-budget-office/) questioning nuclear weapons projects. In the end, though — and given military spending generally, this shouldn’t surprise you — the boosters of more nuclear weapons won and so the nuclear budget came in at $27.6 billion.

Nuclear Weapons Budget total: $27.6 billion

Running tally: $743.8 billion

**“Defense-Related” Activities**

At $9.7 billion, this budget item includes a number of miscellaneous national-security-related matters, including international FBI activities and payments to the CIA retirement fund.

Defense-Related Activities total: $9.7 billion

Running tally: $753.5 billion

**The Intelligence Budget**

Not surprisingly, since it’s often referred to as the “black budget,” there is relatively little information publicly available about intelligence community spending. According to recent press reports, however, defense firms are finding this area [increasingly profitable](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/01/31/classified-defense-spending/), citing double-digit growth in just the last year. Unfortunately, Congress has little capacity to oversee this spending. A recent [report](https://www.pogo.org/report/2020/02/a-primer-on-congressional-staff-clearances/) by Demand Progress and the Project On Government Oversight found that, as of 2019, only 37 of 100 senators even have staff capable of accessing any kind of information about these programs, let alone the ability to conduct proper oversight of them.

However, we do know the total amount of money being requested for the 17 major agencies in [the U.S. intelligence community](https://www.dni.gov/index.php/what-we-do/members-of-the-ic): $85 billion. That money is split between the Pentagon’s intelligence programs and funding for the Central Intelligence Agency and other “civilian” outfits. This year, the military’s intelligence program requested [$23.1 billion](https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2080605/department-of-defense-releases-2021-military-intelligence-program-budget-request/), and [$61.9 billion](https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/item/2097-a-dni-releases-fy-2021-budget-request-figure-for-the-national-intelligence-program) was requested for the other agencies. Most of this funding is believed to be in the Pentagon’s budget, so it’s not included in the running tally below. If you want to know anything else about that spending you’re going to need to get a security clearance.

Intelligence budget total: $85 billion

Running tally: $753.5 billion

**The Military and Defense Department Retirement and Health Budget**

While you might assume that these costs would be included in the defense budget, this budget line shows that funds were paid by the Treasury Department for military retirement programs (minus interest and contributions from those accounts). While such retirement costs come to $700 million, the healthcare fund costs are actually a negative $8.5 billion.

Military and Department of Defense Retirement and Health Costs total: -$7.8 billion

Running tally: $745.7 billion

**The Veterans Affairs Budget**

The financial costs of war are far greater than what’s seen in the Pentagon budget. The [most recent estimates](https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/US%20Budgetary%20Costs%20of%20Wars%20November%202019.pdf) by Brown University’s the Costs of War Project show that the total costs of the nation’s main post-9/11 wars through this fiscal year come to $6.4 trillion, including a minimum of $1 trillion for the costs of caring for veterans. This year the administration requested $238.4 billion for Veterans Affairs.

Veterans Affairs Budget: $238.4 billion

Running tally: $984.1 billion

**The International Affairs Budget**

The International Affairs budget includes funds for both the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Numerous defense secretaries and senior military leaders have urged public support for spending on diplomacy to prevent conflict and enhance security (and the State Department also engages in a number of military-related activities). In the Obama years, for instance, then-Marine General James Mattis typically quipped that without more funding for diplomacy he was going to [need more bullets](https://www.usglc.org/blog/the-military-understands-smart-power/). Ahead of the introduction of this year’s budget, former chairman of the joint chiefs of staff Admiral Mike Mullen [told congressional leaders](https://www.usglc.org/media/2020/02/mullen-feb-2020.pdf) that concerns about great-power competition with China and Russia meant that “cutting these critical investments would be out of touch with the reality around the world.”

The budget request for $51.1 billion, however, cuts State Department funding significantly and proposes keeping it at such a level for the foreseeable future.

International Affairs Total: $51.1 billion

Running tally: $1,035.2 billion

**The Homeland Security Budget**

The Department of Homeland Security consists of a [hodgepodge](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_1205_dhs-organizational-chart.pdf) of government agencies, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Transportation Security Administration, the U.S. Secret Service, Customs and Border Protection, and the Coast Guard. In this year’s $49.7 billion budget, border security costs make up a [third of total costs](https://www.taxpayer.net/national-security/homeland-security-budget-request-identity-crisis-alert-secret-service-is-shuttling-back-across-town-to-the-treasury-department/).

The department is also responsible for coordinating federal cyber-security efforts through the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. Despite growing domestic cyber concerns, however, the budget request for that agency has fallen since last year’s budget.

Homeland Security total: $52.1 billion

Running tally: $1,087.3 billion

**Interest on the Debt**

And don’t forget the national security state’s part in paying interest on the national debt. Its share, 21.5% of that debt, adds up to $123.6 billion.

Interest on the debt total: $123.6 billion

Final tally: $1,210.9 billion

**The Budget’s Too Damn High**

In other words, at $1.21 trillion, the actual national security budget is essentially twice the size of the announced Pentagon budget. It’s also a compendium of military-industrial waste and misspending. Yet those calling for higher budgets continue to argue that the only way to keep America safe is to pour in yet more tax dollars at a moment when [remarkably little](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/22/us/politics/trump-infrastructure-week.html) is going into, for instance, [domestic infrastructure](https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/).

The U.S. already spends more than the [next seven](https://www.pgpf.org/chart-archive/0053_defense-comparison) countries combined on a military that is seemingly incapable of either [winning or ending](https://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176663/tomgram%3A_engelhardt%2C_war_addicts%2C_inc./) any of the wars it’s been engaged in since September 2001. So isn’t it reasonable to suggest that the more that’s spent on what’s still called national security but should perhaps go by the term “national insecurity,” the less there is to show for it? More spending is never the solution to poor spending. Isn’t it about time, then, that the disastrously bloated “defense” budget experienced some meaningful cuts and shifts in priorities? Shouldn’t the U.S. military be made into a far leaner and more agile force geared to actual defense instead of disastrous wars (and preparations for more of the same) across a significant swath of the planet?

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