

The Bunker: The Trillion-Dollar Pentagon

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Global Research, November 11, 2022
[POGO](#) 9 November 2022

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

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This week in The Bunker: the Pentagon is on the verge of spending \$1 trillion a year; honoring vets by incorporating their care into the defense budget; a dirty little secret that boosts defense spending; and more.

Fitting the Pentagon to a 'T': The nation's first trillion-dollar defense budget looms

It's not here yet, by most accounting, but we're within spitting distance of spending \$1 trillion annually on the U.S. military. This might actually be a good thing, if more spending made us safer. But it doesn't. It only makes us *feel* safer, which is a devil's bargain.

The Senate version of the 2023 defense authorization act earmarks [\\$857 billion](#) (PDF) for national defense. The slackers in the House only want [\\$850 billion](#) (PDF), which may be why it's known as the "[lower house](#)." Both bills are well beyond President Biden's [\\$813 billion request](#). Differences between the two versions will be ironed out in the coming weeks, but the bottom line is that the Pentagon is bound to break the trillion-dollar barrier relatively soon.

Even *let's-spend-more* conservatives are split on this gusher. "We need a \$1 trillion defense budget," argued Rich Lowry, editor of the *National Review*, earlier this year. "We need more and better weapons for a newly threatening security environment," he [wrote](#) shortly after Vladimir Putin's forces invaded Ukraine. "Russia's aggression underlines the potential of the U.S. having to fight simultaneous wars in Europe and Asia, to defend NATO and to stave off a China attack on Taiwan or elsewhere, when our forces currently may not be adequate to winning one fight." *Simultaneous wars in Europe and Asia?* Be thankful he didn't enlist the Star Wars' [Sith](#) to inflate the threat even more.

But Lowry's colleague Philip Klein shot the notion down. "We can't afford a \$1 trillion defense budget," Klein [maintained](#), citing the fiscal challenges facing the nation and bipartisan stupor when it comes to dealing with them. And, as always, there is the political

angle: “If conservatives get behind the idea of massive hikes in the military budget, it gives them a lot less credibility in arguing against the massive social spending being proposed on the left.”

The Pentagon budget generally rides an up escalator, as former Assistant Secretary of Defense Larry Korb [spells out](#) (*WARNING: Math Alert, Including Percentages*) as he details the Biden administration’s creation of the 2023 defense budget:

The administration had to choose a base starting point: the \$753 billion it originally requested for FY [fiscal year] 2022 or the \$770 billion it projected it would request in FY 2023. Alternatively, the administration could use the \$780 billion that Congress authorized for FY 2022, which was \$37 billion — 5% — more than President Biden’s proposal for FY 2022 and \$10 billion more than he intended to request for FY 2023.

Instead of choosing either of these base amounts in its FY 2023 budget proposal, the Biden administration requested \$813 billion, which went far beyond what it proposed in FY 2022. This was a result of pressure from Congress — including from many Democrats, who objected to several of President Biden’s proposed reductions, particularly to the Navy — and the impact of inflation on pay for active duty, reserve, and retired military personnel. This is \$33 billion — about 4% — more than what Congress approved in FY 2022 and about \$45 billion — 10% — more than the administration projected it would propose in FY 2023.

And that was all before Congress further fattened it up.

Estimates of when U.S. defense spending will top \$1 trillion range from [next year](#) to [2027](#) to [2030](#) depending on gobs of variables. Toss in elements like homeland security and the Pentagon’s share of interest paid on the national debt — as Mandy Smithberger, the former director of the Center for Defense Information here at the Project On Government Oversight has done — and a case can be made that the nation [crossed that \\$1 trillion threshold](#) five years ago.

Speaking of which...

Accounting for veterans

Technically speaking, of course, we do already spend well over \$1 trillion annually on national defense, even before adding in national debt interest. You can get there simply by adding what we pay to care for our veterans to the Pentagon’s purse. This year, we’ve authorized [\\$778 billion](#) for today’s military, and appropriated another \$271 billion to spend in 2022 for those who fought yesterday’s wars (total: \$1.05 trillion). VA spending has [more than doubled](#) over the past decade. Its proposed \$301 billion 2023 budget is more than the \$298 billion the Pentagon [spent in 1999](#).

The Defense Department pays to mothball ships, store warplanes in the desert, and clean up its environmental messes. Why should soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Guardians be treated any differently?

We owe our veterans a lot. That’s something to keep in mind every day, not just this week when Veterans Day comes around. One way of acknowledging that debt is to incorporate the cost of caring for them into the U.S. defense budget.

How Contractors Make More Money by Refusing to Share Their Blueprints

The Bunker regularly comes across contract awards earmarked for a weapon's developer because that original builder is the only one who has the detailed specs and drawings needed to build spare parts. William LaPlante, the Pentagon's top civilian weapons buyer, was speaking at a weapons-buying conference November 4 when [he recalled](#) what an unnamed defense industry official told him about contractors' reluctance to share such data.

"To be honest with you, you're going to have to make us do it," the contractor told LaPlante. "We will not do it on our own, because it actually puts us at a disadvantage to our competitor. If my stuff is interchangeable with another company's stuff, then I've just lowered the barrier of entry."

Take this [recent contract](#) (PDF) to Bell Helicopter for chopper maintenance. "The Government does not currently own the technical data, nor possess the requisite license rights necessary to compete the efforts anticipated," the Pentagon said in justifying its award to Bell without competition. "The estimated timeframe to qualify another source and develop the technical data for the requirements herein is eight (8) years."

The type of helicopter involved [first flew](#) 66 years ago.

That's another reason why the annual U.S. defense budget will soon top \$1 trillion.

Here's what has caught *The Bunker's* eye recently

[Secret wars](#)

The Brennan Center for Justice published a November 3 investigation into the clandestine combat the U.S. military has been waging in more than a dozen nations around the world since 9/11.

[Submarine race to the bottom](#)

After the *USS Connecticut* rammed the sea floor because its crew [failed to follow](#) existing rules, the service has rolled out an armada of new rules they can ignore, *Navy Times* reported November 2.

Count your blessings...

Not a single word about the 2022 mid-term elections in *The Bunker* this week. You're welcome.

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