

What War Are We Buying With Another \$58 Billion for the Military?

By [William Boardman](#)

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We have to start winning wars again. I have to say, when I was young, in high school and college, everybody used to say we never lost a war. We never lost a war, remember?...

America never lost. And now we never win a war. We never win. And don't fight to win. We don't fight to win. We've either got to win or don't fight at all. - [President Trump](#) to the National Governors Association, Feb. 27, 2017

"Don't fight at all" has a pleasant, fresh ring to it, like any good salesman's con. The President was about to announce a proposed military budget increase of \$58 billion, making the world's biggest military budget that much bigger. So he probably wasn't thinking, "Don't fight at all." In fact, almost as soon as he said that, he turned to his frustration with the Middle East after 17 years and a cost of \$6 trillion. "That's just unacceptable. And we're nowhere," the President said,

Actually, if you think about it, we're less than nowhere. The Middle East is far worse than it was 16, 17 years ago. There's not even a contest. So we've spent \$6 trillion. We have a hornet's nest. It's a mess like you've never seen before. We're nowhere. So we're going to straighten it out.

The Middle East is a big place, so straightening "it" out could be even more complicated than health care. And the President hasn't proposed a strategic plan that we know of, so how he plans to go about straightening it out is a little murky. Still, we're already at war there, so that's a start. We're at war under a 2001 [Authorization to Use Military Force \(AUMF\)](#), passed then by a mindless and panicked Congress, and left in place ever since by a feckless Congress (Rep. Barbara Lee the lone exception). With his AUMF in place, with the world's largest military, and with virtually no American opposition to war in other places, the President pretty much has carte blanche to wreak havoc as he chooses.



US Navy fighter jets flying side-by-side with Chilean Air Force fighter jets next to the USS George Washington aircraft carrier. (photo: US Navy)

Escalation in Syria is well under way, [especially bombing raids](#)

As part of Operation Inherent Resolve, more [US troops have been deployed](#) in northwestern Syria (how many is unclear, but the total force is about 500). According to US Centcom, their

mission is a “reassurance and deterrence [mission] ... designed to be a visible symbol to other parties there that Manbij has already been fully liberated” from the Islamic State (which held it from January 2014 to August 2016). [Manbij is a city](#) that once had a population of 100,000, located roughly midway [between Aleppo and the Turkish border](#). Military forces nearby in the region include Syrian, Russian, Turkish, and Kurdish troops, as well as elements of the Islamic State and Syrian rebels. The American role, in cooperation with the Russians at least, is to keep others from interfering in Manbij, which was governed for awhile by a mostly local military council. Now the [Kurdish Democratic Union Party](#) (PYD), a leading force of Syrian Kurds, is trying to establish Manbij as a democratic autonomous administration that would, in effect, be part of a de facto Kurdistan in northern Syria. The Turks are adamantly opposed to Kurdish autonomy and would have attacked Manbij but for the US and Russian forces in their way.

US Weapons of Mass Destruction might get wider use

The [US Central Command](#) (based in Tampa, Florida) has recently confirmed what it had previously denied: that the US has used [depleted uranium weapons in Syria](#) against the Islamic State. For decades now, the US has been using – and denying that it uses – depleted uranium weapons in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries in the region. Depleted uranium weapons have long been controversial, and their use is [arguably a war crime](#), since the radioactive impact of the weapons does not discriminate between combatants and civilians and leaves radioactively poisoned areas behind for decades. Under international law as well as 18 US Code sec 2332c, depleted uranium weapons are considered weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Use of depleted uranium weapons arguably violates numerous international treaties, including the Geneva Conventions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. More than 150 countries have worked to control or ban depleted uranium weapons, an effort always opposed by the US despite the connection between depleted uranium and the [poisoning of US troops](#) called Gulf War Syndrome.

Yemen: an undefended target of opportunity for any murderous impulse

The [pace of drone strikes](#) by the US on *suspected* terrorists has [increased more than fourfold](#) since Trump took office. At the same time, Trump has abandoned responsibility for ordering drone strikes, leaving it to others down the chain of command to kill unlucky civilians at will. The US carried out more than [30 drone strikes against Yemen](#) in the first days of March alone. According to the US Central Command, the ostensible target was “al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula” and the drone strikes “were conducted in partnership with the government of Yemen.”

The “government of Yemen” is essentially a legal fiction that controls a small portion of the country around Aden and is significantly controlled by Saudi Arabia. The US Command characterizes al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula as “a local and regional threat” with manpower in the “low thousands.” US Central Command also says this al-Qaida “has more American blood on its hands” than the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria does, and that it is a “deadly terrorist organization that has proven itself to be very effective in targeting and killing Americans, and they have intent and aspirations to continue doing so,... This is a dangerous group locally, regionally and transnationally, to include against the United States, the West and our allies,” while offering no specific details. Meanwhile Yemen is on the [verge of mass starvation](#) and the US continues to support the Saudi-led blockade of the poorest country in the region. That’s one way to “straighten out” the Middle East.

William M. Boardman has over 40 years experience in theatre, radio, TV, print journalism, and non-fiction, including 20 years in the Vermont judiciary. He has received honors from Writers Guild of America, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Vermont Life magazine, and an Emmy Award nomination from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

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