

March 8, 2019

Open Letter to Congress: Pentagon Doesn't Need a Budget Boost

Dear Representative/Senator:

As organizations representing Americans across the political spectrum, we are writing to voice our strong opposition to an increase in the Pentagon budget for fiscal year (FY) 2020.

Rather than increase the already historically large Pentagon budget¹, we urge you to set national defense spending levels (budget function 050) for Fiscal Year 2020 at or below \$576 billion, which is the level established for FY 2020 by the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018, and to refrain from using the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) “emergency” account to circumvent these caps. Returning to this level of Pentagon funding is necessary to better align Congressional action and budgeting with our nation’s true security needs and the preferences of a majority of the American people.

Current national defense spending is not driven by necessity. Indeed, ever-changing budget levels emerging from the Trump administration demonstrate that politics guide the President’s budget requests. The United States currently spends more on the military than the next seven countries combined and more than President Reagan at the height of his Cold War buildup². Moreover, those concerned about military readiness should examine the effect of 17 years of war on the military and the transfer of readiness funds to unneeded weapons programs, not lack of resources.

Furthermore, in 2018, the Department of Defense finally completed -and failed - a first-ever full financial audit that every other major federal agency has passed³. Rather than reward that failure with still more of the taxpayers’ billions, Congress should insist that the Pentagon decrease waste, improve accountability, and prioritize missions. For example, the Pentagon is currently spending tens of billions of dollars on weapons systems that may never work properly in combat, like the F-35 aircraft⁴; or are in excess of defense needs, like the plan to build a new generation of nuclear weapons⁵ at a cost of over \$1 trillion, or a new Space Force that will cost billions of taxpayer dollars without a corresponding increase in US capabilities⁶.

In addition, Congress should not use Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funding as a way to escape budget limits it itself imposed on the Pentagon nine years ago⁷. This recommendation is not ours alone: the Government Accountability Office (GAO)⁸ and two bipartisan former Pentagon Comptrollers⁹ are part of the growing chorus calling on Congress to rein in OCO to ensure better use and accounting of taxpayer dollars, especially those used ostensibly for war-making.

When he was still in Congress, Office of Management & Budget Director and Acting Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney also decried the use of OCO dollars as a “slush fund.”¹⁰ The Pentagon has acknowledged that tens of billions of these OCO dollars supplement “base” budget spending on non-war programs.¹¹ After

1 Military Times, A Pentagon Budget Like None Before: \$700 Billion, 2/11/18

2 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “Military Spending in in 2017,” 3/24/18; Ben Freeman and William D. Hartung, “Putting the Pentagon’s Pennies in Perspective,” 2/17/18

3 The New York Times, The Pentagon Doesn’t Know Where Its Money Goes

4 Project On Government Oversight, “F-35 May Never Be Ready For Combat,” 9/9/16

5 Gary Schaub Jr. and James Forsyth Jr., “An Arsenal We Can All Live With,” 5/23/10

6 Project On Government Oversight, “Space Force: A Historical Perspective,” 10/16/18

7 Project on Government Oversight, Pentagon admits half of War Funding is Slush, 10/3/16

8 Government Accountability Office, “Overseas Contingency Operations: Alternatives Identified to the Approach to Fund War- Related Activities,” 1/28/19

9 Stimson Center, “First Full Accounting of US Counterterrorism Finds US Has Spent \$2.8 Trillion,” 5/6/18

10 Mick Mulvaney, “Mulvaney, Van Hollen, Lee, Sanford Amendment Helps Prevent Abuse of OCO Slush Fund,” 5/19/16

11 Congressional Research Service, “The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11,” 12/8/14

approximately \$1.8 trillion in appropriations into this off-budget account since 2001,¹² we strongly urge you to put an end to this slush fund, especially in light of reports that the administration will request upwards of \$170 billion in OCO dollars for FY 2020,¹³ a huge leap over last year’s OCO appropriation of \$67.9 billion. The abuse of this fund should be met by significant reductions, not increases, to the OCO account.

Just two months ago, the President tweeted that he sought a “meaningful halt” to out-of-control Pentagon spending, calling the Pentagon’s \$716 billion FY 2019 budget “Crazy!”¹⁴ Members of this coalition agree that curtailing irresponsible Pentagon funding is increasingly important even as we differ on where Americans’ taxpayer dollars ought be directed. Ultimately, prioritization within budget constraints will strengthen the Pentagon by ensuring that missions are appropriately aligned with existing force structure.¹⁵

Sincerely,



Bay Area Labor Committee for Peace & Justice



Center for International Policy



Coalition to Reduce Spending



Council for a Livable World



DownsizeDC.org, Inc.



FreedomWorks



Friends Committee on National Legislation



Georgia WAND Education Fund, Inc.



National Priorities Project at the Institute for Policy Studies



National Taxpayers Union



Peace Action



Project On Government Oversight



Taxpayers for Common Sense



Taxpayers Protection Alliance



The United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society



Win Without War



Women’s Action for New Directions

12 Taxpayers for Common Sense, “Oversight Needed for Overseas Contingency Operations Account,” 2/7/19

13 Inside Defense, “Pentagon planning a mammoth FY-20 war budget to avoid spending cap,” 2/7/19

14 Politico, Trump reverses course, tells Pentagon to boost budget request to \$750 billion, 12/9/18

15 Center for Strategic and International Studies, Analysis of the FY 2019 Defense Budget, 9/20/18