A false mythology

ANYONE with even rudimentary awareness of the facts of today's economic life finds himself in an Alice's Wonderland of misleading rhetoric as he reads, or listens to, the attack on defense spending by many members of Congress and the news media. They appear to see the world as they'd like it to be, rather than the world as it really is. There's a topsy-turvy world, where black is white, right is wrong, less spending is more, and shrinking military forces somehow have become a monster devouring U.S. resources.

Alfred Wohlstetter notes very perceptively in "Foreign Affairs" that a false mythology has been built up around such inaccurate terms as "the arms race," "routinely mounting defense budgets," and "record defense spending." This creates the misleading impression that our defense establishment is on a runaway spending spree.

Another discerning observer, former Presidential Special Assistant R. W. Komer, says this "rhetorical imagery" obscures more than it reveals, and urges Congress and the press to heed the warnings of James Schlesinger on U.S. defense expenditures vis-a-vis the U.S.S.R.

How can there be a nuclear "arms race," Wohlstetter wonders, when the U.S. isn't racing? Its nuclear effect is steadily declining rather than increasing in real terms, he points out.

The gap between reality and the perceptions of defense critics seems to center on their refusal to recognize the erosive effects on defense dollars of continuing inflation. Public figures who continue to hammer at "soaring arms costs" ignore a basic, unchallengeable fact. It is that, while the number of dollars appropriated for defense has increased, we are getting far less defense per dollar.

The myth is that this nation is spending less for defense in pre-Vietnam dollars than at any point since FY 1950, when Louis Johnson's economizing rendered us almost impotent in the face of North Korea's thrust across the 38th Parallel.

The reality of defense spending is revealed by such facts as these:—Today's defense dollar buys about 49 per cent less than it did in 1968, the peak year of the Vietnam War.

— Defense spending today accounts for 24 per cent of all federal outlays, only one-half of the 47 per cent that prevailed in 1960, and the proportion continues to decrease.

— The misperceptions of those who would make further reductions in defense spending become even more apparent in comparisons of the "conventional forces" of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia accurately pointed out that Soviet military manpower has increased by one million since 1964 while ours has dropped by 850,000.

In consequence, Russian forces are now double ours. He reminded: "On the average from 1972 to 1974, the Soviets produced 3,000 tanks per year compared to 462 by the United States. They produced annually 1,200 cannons, compared to 170 in the U.S.; 939 tactical aircraft were produced by the Soviets compared to 549 in the United States; 59 surface ships for them compared to 11 for us."

The Soviet Union is our potential adversary and we accept such growing disparities in defense capabilities only at great risk.

Nor are the National Guard and reserves insulated from the downward trend. Our appropriations have followed an upward trend in dollar amounts, but inflation has given our funds less buying power, reducing our ability to produce the readiness required.

Americans usually forget that the principal reason for uniting our 13 states under a strong central government nearly 200 years ago was to provide for their mutual security in a dangerous world. The world is still dangerous, and national defense still is one of the federal government's most crucial responsibilities. Without a defense structure that's adequate to cope with the threat posed by our potential enemies, we risk everything—life, liberty and continued enjoyment of the good things our mutual effort has produced.