FINANCING A STRONG NATIONAL DEFENSE

In this election year, we will not find any politicians who do not say they support a strong national defense. However, many such candidates, when asked about their defense-spending views, will answer you with something like, “I believe in a strong national defense, but... that.” But can cover a lot of territory, and usually means the politician doesn’t support President Reagan’s and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger’s ideas of what constitutes a strong national defense.

Critics of Weinberger’s $305 billion fiscal year 1984 defense-spending proposal respond in a variety of ways when confronted with the question: “Where would you cut if you don’t like what the president and Defense Department have proposed?”

One, they want to get at fraud, waste and abuse. Few would suggest there is not a waste in a $305 billion-spending proposal. However, what is usually heard in this regard is tales of $40 claw hammers and $916 stoop caps. The reason these incidents occur is not because huge sums are expended in this way, but rather because the item the stoop cap is procured inordinately.

That doesn’t mean the Air Force should have been paying $916 for a stoop cap, but neither does it mean the Air Force is paying $916 apiece for thousands of stoop caps.

Two, another frequent response from defense-spending critics is to say they fully support a strong national defense, but they oppose such weapons systems as the B-1 bomber, the MX missile, the M-1 tank and the A-444 attack helicopter because there is too much waste.

This is generally a prelude for the argument to buy more weapons cheaper. There are two things wrong with this approach.

First, the easiest thing in the world is to single out one expensive weapons system for criticism and cancellation without explaining how its elimination would affect a coherent defense program. President Reagan sometimes is criticized for “buying everything” without the critics noting it requires more than a single, massive, worldwide, superpower defense. Just as an example, it doesn’t make much sense to have a number of rapidly deployable light infantry divisions stationed in the United States if the Air Force doesn’t have the airlift capability to deploy them.

Second, what many critics of specific programs ignore is that much of the spending for things like the MX and the M-1 tank is for modernization. Just as businesses don’t use computers nor motorists drive cars designed in the 1950s, neither can the military rely on intercontinental ballistic missiles nor main battle tanks designed 25 years ago. They provide no deterrence and little ability to survive and prevail in combat, if needed be.

Three, when one peels back the layers of criticism of defense spending, one frequently finds isolationism of the type that was popular in the 1930s.

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What isolationists like Ravenal do not usually explain—he did not in his newspaper articles—are the assumptions the authors of such a proposal. They assume a 180-degree turn in U.S. foreign policy as we know it today and as we have known it since World War II. That turn would include a vast restructuring of the world and its alliances, egalitarianism and friendships. It would assume a Western Europe that was neutralist at best and probably pro-Soviet in part. Many small, weak European countries believe they had no choice but to make a deal with the Soviets if they lacked strong U.S. support and defense.

Such a Fortress America foreign policy would mean some, though not all, Latin American countries would be under Castro’s domination. Mexico could become an unfriendly neighbor. It could mean a Middle East and Persian Gulf dominated by governments that might or might not be friendly to us.

What is certain is that Persian Gulf oil would be available to western European nations at the suffering of our toles—and probably only if we acted mighty polities toward them.

This is not the posture of a superpower. It is the posture of a supplicant, the kind of supplicant the United States has not been since President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided to fight the Barbary Pirates rather than send them tribute, which, no doubt, would have lessened our freedom.

Freedom is not cheap. Delaware Governor Pierre S. du Pont IV commented on this: “Freedom has a price, and sometimes that price has to be paid.” That price is composed of both dollars and lives. We’d like to suggest that the easiest part should be the dollars needed for a strong national defense. We’d be saved by withdrawing our forward-deployed forces in Korea and Europe and concentrating more on home defense, which is the inevitable and inviting to attack.

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