

GREAT DEBATES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Unit 12: How Much Should the Nation Invest in Defense?

The Issue

On March 23, 1983, President Ronald Reagan delivered a televised speech to the nation. In this speech Reagan called for an increase in defense spending to revitalize the military and to insure national security. When many of the President's critics questioned the need for so large an increase in military spending, an old debate was revived once again.

Background

The goal of national security policy is to defend the nation against attack by enemy forces and to protect its vital social, political, and economic institutions from the actions of foreign states. For much of its history, however, the United States has been free from the fear of invasion. From the earliest days of the Republic, many Americans strongly objected to the maintenance of a large standing army, and military expenditures remained quite low in times of peace. In fact, from the American Revolution to World War I, volunteers were the main source of troops for the American armed services.

After World War II the United States faced new problems in international relations and national security. These problems created a need for fresh ideas about defending the nation and insuring world order. In response to the fear of Soviet expansion, America abandoned its traditional policy of isolationism in favor of a new network of defense alliances. The military budget grew to support new weapons systems, a sizable standing army, and a global commitment of American forces. Technological change contributed to a nuclear arms race, and new armaments influenced the course of foreign policy and the nation's economy.

America's post-war military growth was sustained by its vibrant economy—the United States accounted for nearly half of world industrial production in the early years after the war. But domestic and international crises in the 1960s and 1970s threatened the nation's dominant economic and military position. By 1980 the American people found themselves in the grips of high inflation and an energy crisis, confronted by the haunting image of American hostages in Iran. Some Americans felt that the answer to these crises was a renewed military buildup.

The Readings

The following debate begins with excerpts from a nationally televised speech that President Reagan delivered to the American people in March 1983. In "Address to the American People," Reagan presents his position on the defense-spending issue.

The Center for Defense Information is a lobby group based in Washington, D.C. It describes itself as a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization. "The Need for a Level Military Budget," the Center's response to President Reagan, appeared in a 1983 issue of the group's own publication, *The Defense Monitor*.

Update

The debate over the condition and direction of America's defense system continues to be lively and heated. At the moment no clear consensus has emerged as to what constitutes a proper and reasonable level of defense spending. Politicians and private citizens alike hold widely differing views on this important topic.

How Much Should the Nation Invest in Defense?

Ronald Reagan, *President of the United States from 1981–1989*, delivered this televised speech in March 1983.

THE DEFENSE POLICY of the United States is based on a simple premise: The United States does not start fights. We will never be an aggressor. We maintain our strength in order to deter and defend against aggression—to preserve freedom and peace.

Since the dawn of the atomic age, we have sought to reduce the risk of war by maintaining a strong deterrent and by seeking genuine arms control. Deterrence means simply this: Making sure any adversary who thinks about attacking the United States or our allies or our vital interests concludes that the risks to him outweigh any potential gains. Once he understands that, he won't attack. We maintain the peace through our strength; weakness only invites aggression. . . .

For 20 years, the Soviet Union has been accumulating enormous military might. They didn't stop when their forces exceeded all requirements of a legitimate defensive capability. And they haven't stopped now.

During the past decade and a half, the Soviets have built up a massive arsenal of new strategic nuclear weapons—weapons that can strike directly at the United States. . . .

As the Soviets have increased their military power, they have been emboldened to extend that power. They are spreading their military influence in ways that can directly challenge our vital interests and those of our allies. . . .

Some people may still ask: Would the Soviets ever use their formidable military power? Well, again, can we afford to believe they won't? There is Afghanistan, and in Poland, the Soviets denied the will of the people and, in so doing, demonstrated to the world how their military power could also be used to intimidate.

The final fact is that the Soviet Union is acquiring what can only be considered an offensive military force. They have continued to build far more intercontinental ballistic missiles than they

could possibly need simply to deter an attack. Their conventional forces are trained and equipped not so much to defend against an attack as they are to permit sudden, surprise offensives of their own. . . .

Every item in our defense program—our ships, our tanks, our planes, our funds for training and spare parts—is intended for one all-important purpose—to keep the peace. Unfortunately, a decade of neglecting our military forces had called into question our ability to do that. . . .

Believe me, it wasn't pleasant for someone who had come to Washington determined to reduce Government spending, but we had to move forward with the task of repairing our defenses or we would lose our ability to deter conflict now and in the future. We had to demonstrate to any adversary that aggression could not succeed and that the only real solution was substantial, equitable and effectively verifiable arms reduction—the kind we're working for right now in Geneva. . . .

This adds up to a major effort, and it is not cheap. It comes at a time when there are many other pressures on our budget and when the American people have already had to make major sacrifices during the recession. But we must not be misled by those who would make defense once again the scapegoat of the Federal budget. . . .

The calls for cutting back the defense budget come in nice simple arithmetic. They're the same kind of talk that led the democracies to neglect their defenses in the 1930's and invited the tragedy of World War II. We must not let that grim chapter of history repeat itself through apathy or neglect. . . .

If we stop midstream, we will not only jeopardize the progress we have made to date—we will mortgage our ability to deter war and achieve genuine arms reductions. And we will send a signal of decline, of lessened will, to friends and adversaries alike.

"We maintain the peace through our strength; weakness only invites aggression."

Ronald Reagan

Source: David L. Bender, ed. *The American Military*. (St. Paul: Greenhaven Press, 1983).

How Much Should the Nation Invest in Defense?

The Center for Defense Information, a Washington, D.C., lobby group, published *"The Need for a Level Military Budget"* in 1983.

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger assert that their proposed \$280.5 billion military budget for fiscal 1984 cannot be reduced. With no supporting evidence they further assert this figure is the absolute minimum required for the defense of the United States.

The fact of the matter, however, is that nobody knows for certain precisely how large the military budget should be. As in other controversial areas—the economy, inflation, and energy—there is no clear way to measure appropriateness. General George Brown, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said, "How much is adequate is largely subjective because it depends upon uncountable factors." Such candor is all too rare.

As a nation, we cannot continually increase military spending in real terms year after year. Sooner or later it will be necessary to level off this spending and the longer we delay the more difficult it will be. Military spending has already increased much more than is necessary. . . .

In the nuclear era, there is little relationship between amounts of military spending and an adequate national defense posture. Military budgets are frequently framed by many factors that have little to do with military capabilities. Military budgets have recently been used by politicians as vehicles for sending "messages" and "symbols" of will and intention. As Mr. Weinberger said at the start of the Reagan Administration, this is "a time when we should be seen as getting stronger"; ergo, we should spend more money.

In a simplistic fashion Mr. Weinberger equates increased military spending with increased strength. By his formula "real growth" in military expenditures demonstrates real growth in military capability.

In creating a politically charged climate of alarm by alleging U.S. military weaknesses, Mr.

Reagan and Mr. Weinberger have stamped the Congress and the American people into allocating vast sums of money for the military. Our military spending rose more than 68% between 1980 and 1983— an unprecedented rise during peacetime in American history. . . .

Our long-term national security requires that we maintain a rough equilibrium in our ability to pay for weapons and our estimated military requirements. If we rush headlong into a vast military expansion, as Mr. Weinberger is urging, the drain on our economy will unbalance our national security structure. . . .

There is a frantic tone to the Secretary of Defense's statements in his report to the Congress for fiscal year 1984. He conveys a sense of immediate, impending danger of a Soviet attack on the U.S. or our interests throughout the world. As he sees it, "Soviet power threatens us directly and poses obstacles to the successful conduct of our foreign policy. . . . The deterrent strength of the Atlantic Alliance is increasingly threatened, offer-

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for Defense Information

ing opportunities for Soviet coercion in the event of crisis." This excessive fear of potential Soviet actions against the United States is to be countered by ever more rapid increases in military spending for new nuclear and conventional weapons. It is difficult to find any military justification for this dramatic rush to acquire more weapons. . . .

We have an adequate, strong, and effective military force. In the meantime Mr. Weinberger continues using scare tactics to panic the American people and the Congress into buying weapons without adequate justification. . . .

. . . large weapon construction programs will have a detrimental effect on the future of the economy because rapidly increased spending cannot be adequately controlled by the Pentagon. Murray Weidenbaum, former Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, emphasized this point when he said, "I worry that we might be going faster, on a bigger scale than our economy can sustain."

Source: David L. Bender, ed. *The American Military*. (St. Paul: Greenhaven Press, 1983).

GREAT DEBATES WORKSHEET 12

Directions: Use the information in the Unit 12 debate to answer the following questions. If necessary, use an additional sheet of paper.

A. Comprehension

1. What reasons does President Reagan give for calling for an increase in the defense budget?

2. According to the Center for Defense Information, how much did military spending increase between 1980 and 1983?

3. What request does Reagan make of the American people?

4. Identify two of the Center for Defense Information's objections to Reagan's proposals.

B. Critical Thinking

1. **Making Comparisons:** How do the two sides differ in the way they describe the "military threat" of the Soviet Union?

2. **Recognizing Cause and Effect:** Using your textbook as a reference, identify three international developments that may have contributed to President Reagan's request for greater military spending.

3. **Predicting Consequences:** Describe how each of the following might influence the outcome of this debate:
 - a. a major campaign by a lobby group in favor of increased defense spending
 - b. the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe
 - c. conclusive proof that the "Star Wars" missile defense program is technologically possible_____
4. **Testing Conclusions:** Evaluate the arguments on both sides of the debate. Which side's arguments are most effective and convincing? Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.
