

HARDWIRED FOR HARDWARE

Congressional Adjustments to the Administration's Defense Budget Requests, 2016 to 2023

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As a result of the 2023 Fiscal Responsibility Act, defense budget growth will be limited for fiscal year (FY) 2024 and FY 2025. An analysis of congressional adjustments to defense budget requests from FY 2016 to FY 2023 reveals a Congress that favors programmatic expenditures over personnel and operation and maintenance. In a time of fiscal austerity in the near term, DoD priorities must be clearly and concisely conveyed to Congress, and Congress must balance its predilection for hardware with the need to appropriately fund the nonhardware programs and components of the Department.

After increasing the DoD budget in real terms during seven of the past eight fiscal years (2016–23), Congress has pivoted toward suppressing spending by passing the Fiscal Responsibility Act.¹ Approved in June 2023 as part of the debt ceiling deal, the law limits defense budget growth for the next two years while threatening automatic across-the-board cuts, known as sequestration, of approximately \$40 billion below planned spending levels if Congress takes too long to pass full-year appropriations.² These provisions effectively hold the defense budget hostage to incentivize Congress to complete its appropriations work on time.

The law's ultimate effects on spending will depend on future congressional actions, particularly how Capitol Hill handles regular and supplemental budget bills in 2024 and 2025. Despite these uncertainties, the shift from steady spending growth to sudden budgetary restraint indicates a mercurial Congress struggling to balance competing priorities and factions.

The Hill's uneven approach to the defense budget's size, with years of bipartisan support for hefty increases suddenly giving way to an intensive focus on spending

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1. Travis Sharp, *Inconsistent Congress: Analysis of the 2024 Defense Budget Request* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments [CSBA], October 2023), 5, <https://csbaonline.org/>.

2. Sharp, 7.

limits, also characterizes its treatment of specific expenditures. Based on an analysis of congressional adjustments to the administration's defense budget requests from 2016 to 2023, this article finds that Congress has exhibited a programmatic orientation toward defense spending characterized by adding funds for procurement and, to a much lesser extent, research, development, test, and evaluation (RDT&E).

At the same time, Congress has subtracted funds for military personnel, including service member pay and allowances, and operation and maintenance (O&M), including flying hours, ship operations, training, and maintenance. In short, Congress has retained its long-running fixation on acquiring "hardware," particularly favored weapons systems such as missile defense, ships, and aircraft. Of note, this article uses adjustments as a generic term referring to Congress' combined adding and subtracting of funds to DoD budget requests, not as a technical term denoting the various processes for realigning or reprogramming appropriated funds.³

Congress' preference for hardware is not exactly surprising. Lawmakers possess compelling reasons to address defense spending programmatically.⁴ As Charles Hitch, creator of the Defense Department's Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System, observed in the 1960s, "These [weapons systems] choices have become . . . the key decisions around which much else of the defense program revolves."⁵ Other studies have determined Congress' obsession with big-ticket weapons programs remains alive and well.⁶ Still, the article's reconfirmation of this enduring pattern should alert defense strategists as budgets flatten during the Fiscal Responsibility Act's two-year timespan—and potentially remain flat afterward due to continued congressional advocacy for spending limits, a political dynamic that dominated 2023.

The United States is currently navigating intense military competitions against China and Russia while managing deadly conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. This extraordinarily demanding security environment, which blends long-term and immediate challenges, necessitates varied investments across the Joint force. As General Mark Milley, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, remarked in 2023, "We must not allow ourselves to create the false trap that we can either modernize [for tomorrow] or focus only on today—we must do both."⁷

3. Philip J. Candreva, *National Defense Budgeting and Financial Management: Policy and Practice* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2017), 318–26.

4. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Common Defense: Strategic Programs in National Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 3–7.

5. Arnold Kanter, "Congress and the Defense Budget: 1960–1970," *American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1 (March 1972): 135.

6. Seamus P. Daniels and Todd Harrison, "Assessing the Role of Congress in Defense Acquisition Program Instability," paper prepared for the 18th Annual Acquisition Research Symposium, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, May 2021, <https://dair.nps.edu/>; and *Report on Congressional Increases to the Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 Defense Budget* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense [DoD], August 4, 2023), <https://comptroller.defense.gov/>.

7. Jim Garamone, "Milley Says Investments in Military Capabilities Are Paying Off," DoD, May 11, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

As budgets stagnate, if Congress does not moderate its hardware spending add-ons, at least in select areas, then it risks shortchanging the “software” underpinning US military power, including people, readiness, education, and other key ingredients of combat effectiveness often funded through the military personnel and O&M budgets.⁸

History shows the risk of underfunding these critical areas is real. Since the Cold War’s end, military personnel and O&M cuts often have exceeded procurement and RDT&E cuts when defense spending stagnates, worsening readiness shortfalls during those periods. Making hard trade-offs between hardware and so-called software proved less necessary for Congress as it boosted defense budgets throughout the past decade. Such trade-offs will prove essential under the Fiscal Responsibility Act as well as any prospective spending control agreement enacted in its wake. Congress will not have to stop adding money for weapons systems, but it will likely have to lessen those additions to ensure readiness receives the necessary funding.

If history is any guide, overcoming these difficulties now and in the future will require both the Department of Defense and Congress to make improvements. The Pentagon should find new ways to persuade Congress to support essential investments, particularly for nonhardware priorities. At the same time, military planners must develop concepts to fight and win with what the Department already has. On the legislative side, Congress needs a stronger pipeline of defense policy entrepreneurs capable of leading their colleagues to more sound decisions more of the time, specifically by harnessing their procedural power to elicit more impactful information from the Pentagon. Without actions like these, Congress’ fixation on hardware could inadvertently produce a US military that is less broadly prepared to succeed in a dangerous world where the margin of error has become perilously small.⁹

Hypotheses and Data on Congressional Spending Adjustments

Over the past 60 years, scholars have developed three competing hypotheses about how Congress addresses the administration’s defense spending requests.¹⁰ The negligible hypothesis holds that Congress does not have a significant impact on either the overall level of defense spending or the allocation of spending across programs.

8. Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 5; and Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 203.

9. Robert M. Gates, “The Dysfunctional Superpower: Can a Divided America Deter China and Russia?,” *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 6 (November/December 2023).

10. Raymond H. Dawson, “Congressional Innovation and Intervention in Defense Policy: Legislative Authorization of Weapons Systems,” *American Political Science Review* 56, no. 1 (March 1962): 43; Edward J. Laurance, “The Congressional Role in Defense Policy Making: The Evolution of the Literature,” *Armed Forces and Society* 6, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 436–38; Barry M. Blechman, *The Politics of National Security: Congress and U.S. Defense Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 23–29; and Jamie M. Morin, “Squaring the Pentagon: The Politics of Post-Cold War Defense Retrenchment” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, May 2003), 306–7.

Proponents of this view imagine a Congress that essentially tinkers at the margins and functions as “a pushover for the Pentagon,” as Senator William Proxmire (D-Wisconsin) once put it.¹¹ If the negligible hypothesis holds true, then congressional spending adjustments should appear small and inconsequential, generally adhering to the administration’s plans.

The fiscal hypothesis posits that Congress concerns itself with the defense spending topline and pays limited attention to the particulars. Advocates of this model envision a Congress that modifies DoD funding requests primarily to achieve government-wide budgetary goals. If the fiscal hypothesis holds true, then congressional spending adjustments should concentrate on the largest portions of the defense budget—the O&M and military personnel accounts—and exhibit an across-the-board or balanced character, in dollar or percentage terms, consistent with a general indifference toward specific programs.

The programmatic hypothesis claims that, as one analyst describes it, “Congress addresses the defense budget in policy terms and uses its power of the purse as a tool to influence the shape of defense programs.”¹² Lawmakers may demonstrate a programmatic orientation for strategic reasons, as when they feel that specific military activities underpin America’s place in the world. They may also focus on programs for parochial reasons, as when their constituents depend on funding associated with certain activities. In practice, these strategic and parochial motivations often overlap and may conflict, making them difficult to disentangle.¹³ If the programmatic hypothesis proves true, then congressional spending adjustments should exhibit discernible patterns across time and category whereby funds flow toward favored activities and away from disfavored activities.

To assess these hypotheses, the authors collected data on congressional defense spending adjustments from fiscal year (FY) 2016 to FY 2023. The dataset started with 2016 because that was the first year of the upward drift in defense spending referenced in the introduction and ended with 2023 because that was the last year data were available. The dataset contains adjustments as reported in Congress’ annual enacted basic DoD appropriations bill, meaning it excludes military construction, family housing, nuclear weapons activities, and supplementals, or extra expenditures added outside the Department’s annual base budget request. Since the dataset covers only

11. Kanter, “Congress,” 129.

12. Lawrence J. Korb, “Congressional Impact on Defense Spending, 1962–1973: The Programmatic and Fiscal Hypotheses,” *Naval War College Review* 26, no. 3 (November–December 1973): 50.

13. James M. Lindsay, “Parochialism, Policy, and Constituency Constraints: Congressional Voting on Strategic Weapons Systems,” *American Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 4 (November 1990); James M. Lindsay, *Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 172–75; and Rebecca U. Thorpe, *The American Warfare State: The Domestic Politics of Military Spending* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

enacted appropriations, it excludes both authorizing legislative activity and House and Senate interim decisions preceding final enactment.¹⁴

The authors made certain technical modifications to the data to account for irregular reporting practices used in the final years of the Budget Control Act, the law that capped defense budgets from FY 2012 to FY 2021, specifically with respect to funding for Overseas Contingency Operations. Skipping these corrections or performing them differently does not change the central findings.

Altogether, the dataset consists of nearly 10,000 observations, a figure that excludes the arithmetical and inflation manipulations required to generate the results. Although the dataset does not include every line item contained in the DoD appropriations bill, it provides a sufficient body of evidence for the article's analysis.

Congressional Adjustments to DoD Funding Requests, 2016 to 2023

Over the past 75 years, Capitol Hill has not reflexively given the Pentagon whatever it asked for, refuting the negligible hypothesis. From FY 1950 to FY 2023, Congress subtracted from DoD's base budget request three times more often than it added to the request.¹⁵ Understanding this historical thriftiness illuminates the anomaly of recent years in which Congress approved significantly larger base budgets than the Department of Defense requested. Congress has overridden the Department with such generosity only twice before. Once was during President John F. Kennedy's first year controlling the budget (FY 1962), as the young president maneuvered to fulfill his campaign pledge to eliminate a "missile gap" with the Soviet Union.¹⁶ The second was during one of the most intense phases of the war in Iraq (FY 2006 and FY 2007).

14. Robert J. Art, "The Pentagon: The Case for Biennial Budgeting," *Political Science Quarterly* 104, no. 2 (Summer 1989); Mackubin T. Owens, "Micromanaging the Defense Budget," *Public Interest* 100 (Summer 1990); and Paul Stockton, "Beyond Micromanagement: Congressional Budgeting for a Post-Cold War Military," *Political Science Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (Summer 1995).

15. Linwood B. Carter and Thomas Coipuram Jr., *Defense Authorization and Appropriations Bills: FY1970–FY2006* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service [CRS], November 8, 2005), 29–30, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>; Barbara Salazar Torreon and Sofia Plagakis, *Defense Authorization and Appropriations Bills: FY1961–FY2021* (Washington, DC: CRS, July 12, 2021), 39, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>; and Sharp, *Inconsistent Congress*, 15.

16. Travis Sharp, "Wars, Presidents, and Punctuated Equilibriums in US Defense Spending," *Policy Sciences* 52, no. 3 (September 2019): 386–89.

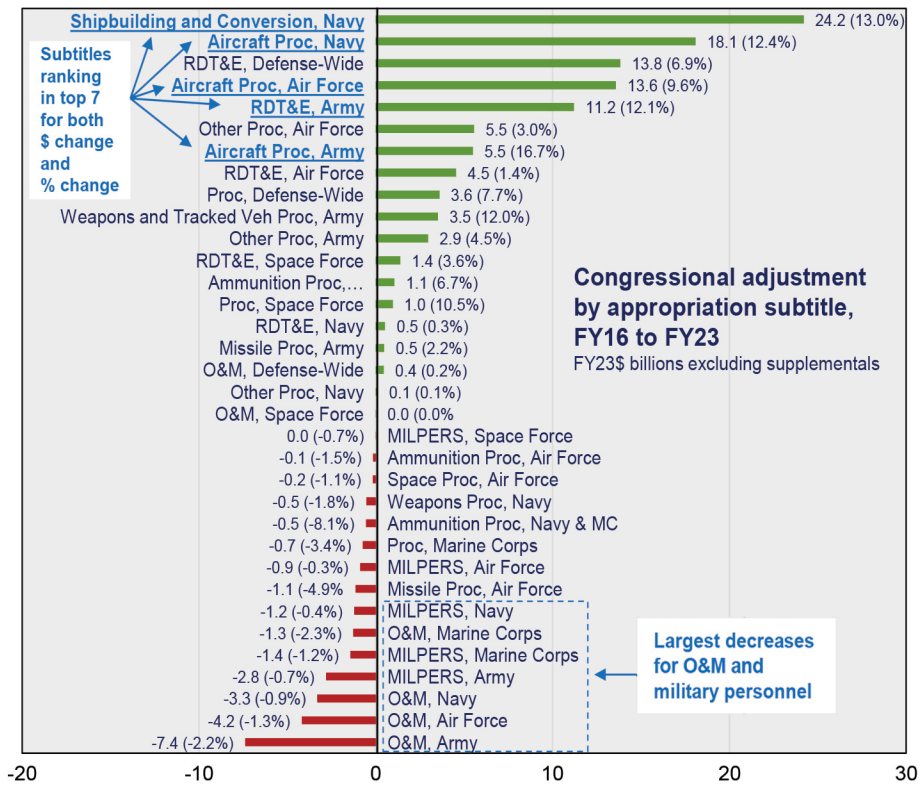


Figure 1. Congressional adjustment to president's budget request as reported in enacted DoD appropriations bill, by appropriation subtitle (FY23 \$ billions, excluding supplementals).¹⁷

Since FY 2016, Congress has not concentrated its spending adjustments in military personnel and O&M, the appropriation titles that receive the most funding (fig. 1). Instead, it has emphasized procurement and RDT&E. This finding thus rebuts the fiscal hypothesis. From FY 2016 to FY 2023, Congress added \$79 billion for procurement above the administration's requests. (The article reports all budgetary figures in FY 2023 constant dollars). That \$79 billion figure is 1.4 times greater, in absolute value terms, than the adjustments made to the three other accounts combined. Congress added nearly 40 percent of that extra \$79 billion in FY 2022 and FY 2023 following the expiration of the Budget Control Act.

This procurement push likely reflected a desire to compensate for years of smaller-than-preferred hardware budgets.¹⁸ Lawmakers perhaps also reasoned that underfunding military personnel, and thereby freeing up funds for procurement additions,

17. Sharp, *Inconsistent Congress*, 18–19.

18. Eric Edelman et al., *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (Washington, DC: DoD, November 2018), 54–56, <https://www.usip.org/>.

was warranted because recruiting shortfalls resulted in personnel costs being smaller than expected.¹⁹ Regardless of the rationale, however, previous studies have reported a similar congressional preoccupation with procurement, so the finding here reaffirms an enduring trend, not an isolated response to contemporary circumstances.²⁰ Overall, the data show that Congress has continued its long-running pattern of using procurement increases as a preferred tool for shaping the US military, supporting the programmatic hypothesis.

Although procurement received most of Congress' largesse, two aspects of RDT&E spending deserve mentioning. First, the RDT&E budget grew faster than other accounts over the past decade, and the data prove that Congress enabled this central trend in US defense spending.²¹ Second, Congress continued relying heavily on RDT&E-directed spending requests, commonly known as earmarks, to steer funds to pet projects.²² So, even though Congress' RDT&E additions totaled less than its procurement additions, the former still provided legislators with a powerful way to advance their priorities in line with the programmatic hypothesis.

Congress' recent practice of overfunding procurement and RDT&E while underfunding military personnel and O&M carries risks with defense spending flattening under the Fiscal Responsibility Act. During budgetary downturns since the end of the Cold War, hardware funding has often received preferential treatment, at least according to the crude metric of absolute dollars. In years since FY 1992, when defense spending remained flat or declined in real terms, military personnel and O&M funding reductions exceeded procurement and RDT&E reductions 71 percent of the time by an average margin of \$18 billion.²³

The portion of defense spending dedicated to military personnel plus O&M has declined modestly since FY 1992, so Congress has not been simply cutting more from a growing spending area, contradicting the fiscal hypothesis. This 30-year trend reverses the pattern from the Cold War, when procurement plus RDT&E reductions were usually larger and procurement often functioned as a "slack variable" by absorbing disproportionate cuts during budgetary downturns.²⁴

Readiness shortfalls have often intensified in those years with flat budgets and larger cuts to military personnel and O&M, particularly when that outcome repeated

19. Thomas Novelly et al., "Big Bonuses, Relaxed Policies, New Slogan: None of It Saved the Military from a Recruiting Crisis in 2023," *Military.com*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.military.com/>.

20. Kanter, "Congress," 131–32; Korb, "Congressional Impact," 54–55; and Daniels and Harrison, "Assessing the Role," 8–9.

21. Sharp, *Inconsistent Congress*, 3.

22. John M. Donnelly, "Hill-Favored Projects Called Defense Budget's 'Black Hole,'" *Roll Call*, May 23, 2023, <https://rollcall.com/>.

23. DoD, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2024* (Washington, DC: CRS, May 2023), Table 6-8, 138–145, <https://comptroller.defense.gov/>.

24. Kevin N. Lewis, *National Security Spending and Budget Trends since World War II* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1990), 81, 109, <https://www.rand.org/>.

itself over multiple years, as happened during the mid-1990s and early-2010s.²⁵ In general, underfunding military personnel and O&M can degrade military preparedness in many ways, including by diminishing support for service members, reducing training opportunities, and constraining equipment maintenance.²⁶ Today, the Air Force and Navy are suffering from several of these problems, with reduced flying hours and inadequate maintenance infrastructure, respectively, representing areas of special concern.²⁷

Congress could mitigate these difficulties with funding increases, but under constrained budgets, those additions would have to come at the expense of procurement add-ons. Continuing to add procurement funds risks exacerbating readiness challenges by forcing the US military to possess equipment that it did not request, creating larger-than-anticipated bills for the personnel, training, and maintenance needed to operate that equipment.

To be clear, the argument here is not that distributing cuts equally across appropriation titles constitutes a strategically optimal response to contracting budgets. Such an approach is flawed because it fails to incorporate assessments of both the probability of war erupting and the US military's standing relative to potential adversaries. By the same logic, however, privileging hardware over military personnel and O&M, regardless of shifting war risks and power balances, represents an equally unsound approach. In the budget-constrained years ahead, Congress' willingness to forswear adding funds for hardware when necessitated by international developments, and instead allocating those funds to invest in readiness and other deserving areas of the Joint force, will prove essential to producing a US military that is as prepared as possible to defend the nation's interests across the globe.

From FY 2016 to FY 2023, Congress concentrated its spending adjustments in favored and disfavored investment areas, precisely as the programmatic hypothesis predicts. Five appropriation subtitles emerged as clear congressional favorites, receiving among the largest increases in both dollar and percentage terms: Navy shipbuilding and conversion, Navy aircraft procurement, Air Force aircraft procurement, Army RDT&E, and Army aircraft procurement.

Although Congress clearly preferred adding money for procurement and RDT&E, not military personnel and O&M, it did subtract funds from multiple procurement subtitles, including several missile and ammunition accounts. For example, it cut the

25. Jerre Wilson and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Shoring Up Military Readiness* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, January 1999), <https://www.brookings.edu/>; and Robert Hale, *Budgetary Turmoil at the Department of Defense from 2010 to 2014: A Personal and Professional Journey* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, August 2015), 4–9, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

26. Todd Harrison, "Rethinking Readiness," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 42–44.

27. Dakota L. Wood, *2024 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2024), 456–59, 492–99, https://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/; *Military Readiness: Improvement in Some Areas, but Sustainment and Other Challenges Persist*, GAO-23-106673 (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, May 2, 2023), <https://www.gao.gov/>; and Michael P. DiMino and Matthew C. Mai, "The US Military Has a Readiness Problem," *Stars & Stripes*, October 24, 2023, <https://www.stripes.com/>.

Air Force's missile procurement requests by an average of 5 percent (~\$140 million) per year in real terms. The fact that Congress underfunded munitions purchases, despite their residing in the favored procurement account, demonstrates a selectivity consistent with the programmatic hypothesis rather than the indiscrimination associated with the fiscal hypothesis.

In terms of policy implications, the underfunding of munitions indicates Congress shares responsibility for the disappointing state of the US munitions industrial base revealed by ongoing American support for Ukraine.²⁸ Without steadier congressional support for munitions procurement, the US military will face serious problems in any future war against a peer adversary.²⁹

Digging even deeper into line-item data for the five favored subtitles, Congress added funds for favored investments in line with the programmatic hypothesis, although some evidence also exists for the fiscal hypothesis. Congress increased spending on preferred programs, in particular unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) across the services, Army rotary wing aircraft, Navy surface and expeditionary vessels, and Air Force C-130s. The extra resources absorbed by these programs, measured in both dollar and percentage terms, confirms their status as congressional darlings, a result also reported in previous research.³⁰

Of course, DoD budgetary gamesmanship potentially affected the observed outcomes. The Pentagon may have knowingly reduced its budget requests for certain programs anticipating that Congress would add funding during the appropriations process. Additionally, any favoritism in Congress' allocation of classified funds cannot be addressed by this unclassified analysis.

Judging whether the favored programs deserved Congress' budgetary largesse under the current US defense strategy is another matter entirely. On the one hand, the funding increases provided to UAS offer a clear example of Congress embracing newer technologies critical to US strategy, particularly since military service support for several of these systems has proven uneven at best.³¹

On the other hand, Congress' generous funding of helicopters and C-130s, among others, shows its preference for supporting established weapons systems. These types of programs potentially lack the compelling operational need justifying hefty budgetary

28. Stacie Pettyjohn and Hannah Dennis, *Precision and Posture: Defense Spending Trends and the FY23 Budget Request* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security [CNAS], November 2022), <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/>; Pettyjohn and Dennis, "Production Is Deterrence": Investing in Precision-Guided Weapons to Meet Peer Challenges (Washington, DC: CNAS, June 2023), <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/>; and Tyler Hacker, "Money Isn't Enough: Getting Serious about Precision Munitions," *War on the Rocks*, April 24, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

29. Tyler Hacker, *Beyond Precision: Maintaining America's Strike Advantage in Great Power Conflict* (Washington, DC: CSBA, June 2023), <https://csbaonline.org/>.

30. Daniels and Harrison, "Assessing the Role," 17.

31. Valerie Insinna, "Get Ready for Another Fight over the Future of the MQ-9 Reaper," *Defense News*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

increases, especially given the opportunity costs of funding them.³² In a March 2023 statement before the House Armed Services Committee, for instance, General Jacqueline Van Ovost, commander of US Transportation Command, testified that the current C-130 inventory remains adequate for meeting airlift requirements in the near future.³³ That said, it remains difficult to make unassailable judgments about the operational relevance of specific weapons given the unpredictability of the future strategic environment.

Congressional committee assignments do not fully explain Capitol Hill's preference for established weapons systems. Air Force C-130s illustrate the point. Since FY 2016, the C-130 and EC-130 programs received increases of 84.5 percent and 85.1 percent, respectively, over the Defense Department's aggregate requests. From FY 2018 to FY 2023, Congress provided the Air Force with an additional \$6.3 billion for the procurement of C-130J aircraft—a nearly 1,825 percent increase from the Defense Department's requested amount of \$347 million.

Yet, the legislator whose district features the main C-130 plant, Representative Barry Loudermilk (R-Georgia), has never served on a committee relevant to C-130 acquisition.³⁴ C-130 contractors, supply chains, and basing locations are spread throughout the United States, fortifying its political support, but the same is true for other programs such as the F-35 that received only a 10.8 percent congressional increase over the Defense Department's aggregate requests. Ultimately, the C-130's recent budgetary success likely has resulted from Air National Guard and industry lobbying, the aircraft's broad range of uses, and Congress' decades-long love affair with the program. These three factors, though more complex, offer more explanatory power than the notion of a small cabal of legislators sitting on the right committees who control the program's destiny.³⁵

Two patterns in Congress' spending adjustments indicate a more fiscal than programmatic orientation. First, Congress regularly reduced spending on programs viewed as underperforming or overfunded, including the Army's RQ-11 UAS and Joint Land Attack Cruise Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor System (JLENS) blimp; the Navy's Infrared Search and Track (IRST) and carrier refueling and overhaul programs; and the Air Force's KC-46A refueling tanker. In each of these cases, Congress justified its cut by invoking program management factors such as cost growth, acquisition plan modifications, accidents, production quality shortcomings, and schedule delays. In no cases reviewed by the authors did Congress justify the reduction by citing a given program's lack of relevance to US defense strategy.

32. Jan Tegler, "Air Force under Pressure as Airlift Capacity Falls," *National Defense*, June 3, 2022, <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/>.

33. *Joint Readiness and Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee Hearing: Posture and Readiness of the Mobility Enterprise – TRANSCOM and MARAD, Hearings before the House Armed Services Committee*, 118th Congress (2023) (statement of General Jacqueline D. Van Ovost, commander, US Transportation Command, United States Air Force), <https://www.ustranscom.mil/>.

34. Ballotpedia, s.v. "Barry Loudermilk," accessed July 27, 2023, <https://ballotpedia.org/>.

35. Frank R. Baumgartner et al., *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

This first pattern reveals an irony in congressional defense budgeting. Although Congress displays a programmatic orientation driven by strategy or parochialism or both, it generally justifies its decisions in fiscal terms using the language of efficiency and stewardship of taxpayer dollars. As a result, fiscal rationales function as a shield for Congress to make decisions that are presumably rooted in programmatic considerations of one kind or another.

Second, in areas such as Army RDT&E and Navy aircraft procurement, Congress distributed its spending increases across a wide variety of programs, a pattern also more consistent with the fiscal hypothesis. Many of these investments supported worthy programs, but Congress' failure to make more decisive choices, particularly with Army RDT&E, indicates a tendency to spread extra money around rather than making informed bets on a handful of key programs.

Surveying congressional spending adjustments over time brings two insights into sharper relief (fig. 2). First, congressional adjustments did not discernibly change following the release of the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, an important document that codified the Defense Department's intention to prevail in great power competition. Congress reoriented aspects of its legislative agenda after the strategy appeared, to be sure, but that reorientation did not register clearly in the budgetary outcomes analyzed here. In fact, some congressional adjustments seemingly contradicted the strategy.

For instance, steady congressional increases for defense-wide and Army RDT&E contrasted with volatile adjustments for Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps RDT&E. The strategy called for implementing technological advancements across the Joint force, of course, but it emphasized fielding forces capable of striking diverse targets inside enemy air and missile defense networks—a capability typically associated with air and naval forces.³⁶

Although the size of congressional adjustments does not necessarily reflect their quality, Congress did not provide the type of steady RDT&E increases for air and naval forces that one might expect given the strategy. Of course, it is possible that Congress identified fewer deficiencies with air and naval RDT&E requests and thus had fewer reasons to add funds. Still, the differing treatment of RDT&E budgets across components provides at least suggestive evidence for the programmatic hypothesis.

36. James N. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: DoD, January 2018), 6, <https://dod.defense.gov/>.

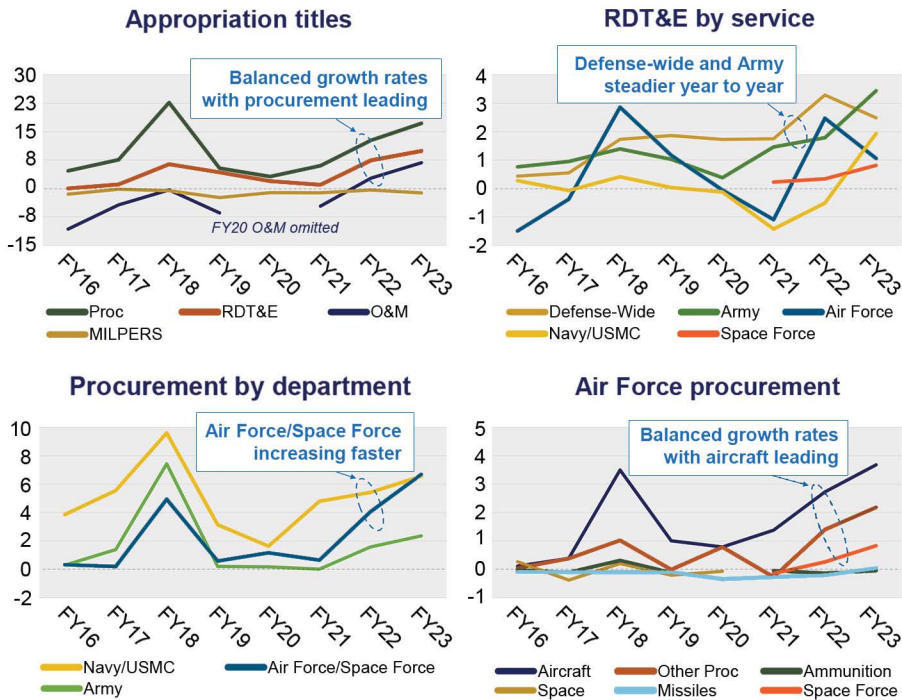


Figure 2. Congressional adjustment to president's budget request as reported in enacted DoD appropriations bill, appropriation titles, and selected subtitles by year (FY23 \$ billions, excluding supplementals).³⁷

Second, some congressional spending additions exhibited the across-the-board or balanced character associated with the fiscal hypothesis. The appropriation titles and Air Force procurement charts in figure 2, for example, depict balanced growth rates across different spending categories, a sign of Congress doling out proportional increases while still favoring certain categories in dollar terms. Yet the procurement by department chart offers a counterexample of Congress bestowing faster-growing increases on the Air Force than on other departments. Overall, although the balance of evidence supports the programmatic hypothesis, Congress is still prone to making fiscal-style adjustments in certain areas.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that Congress continues to exhibit a largely programmatic orientation toward defense spending characterized by overfunding procurement and RDT&E while underfunding military personnel and O&M. The article's analysis of spending adjustments since 2016 show that congressional action significantly affects the defense budget's size and shape, refuting the negligible hypothesis,

³⁷. Sharp, *Inconsistent Congress*, 20–21.

and it displays discernible preferences across programs, undercutting the fiscal hypothesis. The central policy problem identified by the article involves whether Congress can stave off its hunger for hardware and steer funds into other parts of the Joint force, when needed, to maximize US military preparedness under the constrained budgets of the Fiscal Responsibility Act.

The Department of Defense and Congress both shape defense budget outcomes, and both institutions should take steps to improve their handling of American defense policy in the challenging years ahead. If they do not, the US military may find itself less prepared to compete effectively against China and Russia while protecting broader American interests around the world.

The Defense Department should find better ways to persuade Congress to support capabilities viewed as essential to warfighting success. For starters, senior defense officials should communicate precise, tangible, and specific rationales for the minimum investments needed in each spending account. They should express these rationales to Congress in compelling, jargon-free, plain English that makes their force requirements clear—a departure from the Department’s tendency to bury its recommendations in technocratic language that can inadvertently obscure the existence of risk.³⁸ As retired Air Force Lieutenant General David Deptula concluded recently, “Making better-informed decisions about the acceptability of risk and, by extension, what should be done about it requires better communication among all relevant stakeholders.”³⁹

The Department of Defense should also recognize that Congress possesses a programmatic orientation and thus will never approve exactly what the Pentagon requests, though clearer communication by the Pentagon will help shape congressional decisions. As a result, defense planners must develop operational concepts that enable the US military to fight and win using what Congress has provided. If senior officials judge they cannot accomplish the mission with the resources provided, then they must let Congress know. Yet senior officials should also avoid letting the perfect become the enemy of the good by a disproportionate focus on what Congress withholds, and instead concentrate on making efficient and effective use of what is provided.

As an atomistic institution lacking the Defense Department’s hierarchical structure, Congress depends on individual lawmakers to achieve policy outcomes. Consequently, any lasting improvements in Congress’ handling of the defense budget will only come from actions taken by individual policy entrepreneurs who synthesize politics, problems, and policies to create meaning for other lawmakers trying to navigate the often intimidating ambiguity of defense policymaking.⁴⁰ A skilled policy entrepreneur not only must

38. Thane C. Clare, “Networking to Win: Mission Prioritization for Wartime Command and Control,” *War on the Rocks*, January 15, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/>; and Peter C. Combe II, Benjamin Jensen, and Adrian Bogart, *Rethinking Risk in Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2023), 4–8, <https://www.csis.org/>.

39. David A. Deptula, “Managing Risk in Force Planning,” in *2022 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, ed. Dakota L. Wood (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2022), 30, <https://www.heritage.org/>.

40. Nikolaos Zahariadis, *Ambiguity and Choice in Public Policy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 19–22.

act outside their political self-interest with some regularity but also must know more about the policy process than any of their colleagues.⁴¹

Expanding Capitol Hill's pipeline of defense policy entrepreneurs has never been easy, and today's fractured politics present additional difficulties. Yet opportunities do exist to make progress. In the mid-1970s, Representative Les Aspin (D-Wisconsin), then a newly elected congressman who later became a leading defense policy entrepreneur of his generation, penned a series of insightful articles about Congress' role in defense policy and budgeting.

Aspin's main advice was that legislative policy entrepreneurs should focus on implementing procedural changes that indirectly shape decision-making processes to produce better outcomes more of the time. Emphasizing procedure plays to Congress' strengths because, as he observed, "Making decisions on the basis of rational argument requires confronting the issues directly, and Congressmen, who are pressured from all sides, who are continually short of time, and who suffer from lack of expertise, are not likely to do that."⁴² In short, skillful legislators use procedure to get what they want through subtlety rather than confrontation.

Procedural expertise and subtlety are virtues in short supply on Capitol Hill today, but they still offer the best hope of improving congressional defense budgeting. Potential procedural rearrangements available to Congress include changing executive branch reporting relationships, mandating the establishment of certain facts before actions can occur, designating who can make decisions, and bringing outside groups or new groups into decision processes.⁴³

Of these options, mandating the establishment of facts prior to action appears especially promising. Such mandates, if designed properly, would force senior defense officials to present the type of clear, tangible, and specific assessments described in order to satisfy DoD budget requests. The goal here would not be to burden the Defense Department with additional pro forma reporting requirements. Rather, it would be to create categorically different requirements whereby senior DoD leaders must deliver plain-English justifications for advancing preferred programs in hopes of convincing a critical mass of lawmakers to approve them.

Establishing facts prior to action should happen when DoD leaders testify before Congress on their annual budget requests; however, that process has devolved into duplicative hearings characterized by an excess of indecipherable jargon making it of questionable value to Congress, the Department of Defense, or the American public.

Excising a significant portion of these unproductive annual posture testimonies and replacing them with a smaller number of more consequential and comprehensible sessions dedicated to assessing the Department's progress on important initiatives would generate far more useful information for Congress to make decisions. Such

41. Zahariadis, 21–22, 166.

42. Les Aspin, "The Defense Budget and Foreign Policy: The Role of Congress," *Daedalus* 104, no. 3 (Summer 1975): 165.

43. Les Aspin, "Why Doesn't Congress Do Something?," *Foreign Policy* 15 (Summer 1974): 78–80.

information will not eliminate the challenges created by Congress' programmatic orientation, but it stands a reasonable chance of helping Congress improve the coherence and effectiveness of US defense policy by funding programs consistent with the *National Defense Strategy* and DoD missions. Æ

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