

Politics Will Cut America's Military Budget

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The year 2020 is difficult for the United States. The problems of the coronavirus, racism and social justice and the economy have no clear solution. According to an opinion poll from Pew Research Center published June 30, 87 percent of Americans are dissatisfied with the direction of events in the United States. Only 12 percent are satisfied. Only 17 percent of Americans were proud of the country – a shocking number in a country where the American flag is seen everywhere. These results from a respected public opinion survey are not normal. They suggest change is coming.

Politics in Washington is slow to adapt to fast, big change in public opinion. We will see an example this week in the Congress and smart analysts will watch the vote in the Senate about the 2021 Defense Department budget. The left-wing of the American Democratic Party, led by Senator Bernie Sanders, has successfully exercised pressure for a vote to reduce the military budget. They want to cut 10 percent, about \$74 billion dollars. They remind us that the American military budget is bigger than the next ten countries' military budgets – combined.

Former Defense Department official and analyst Lawrence Korb, who is close to the Democratic Party, wrote two weeks ago that the military didn't protect the country from a virus that has killed 140,000 citizens until now. How Sanders and his allies would cut the budget is not clear, but some of their partisans suggest a stop to additional nuclear missile forces, stopping the construction of another aircraft carrier task force and reducing the construction of the F-35 jet fighter airplanes. Senator Elizabeth Warren, who failed in her presidential campaign against Joe Biden, supports the Sanders draft legislation. It is worth noting that the Biden team has put Warren on the list of possible vice president candidates. The leader of the Senate Democrats, Charles Schumer, also supports the draft legislation to cut the defense budget.

According to the American constitution, the Senate and the House of Representatives and the President must all agree on the budgets for the departments. Important representatives from the left wing of the Democratic Party in the House of Representatives support the reduction in the military budget, among them the chairman of the Defense Affairs committee who said a 100-billion-dollar budget reduction is possible. However, other Congressional members from the center wing of the Democratic Party have not supported the military budget cut yet, and Biden also has been silent. More important this week, the Republican Party is against the military budget cut and it has the majority in the Senate. Sanders and his allies will vote, but they will lose; this vote is largely symbolic.

I will watch the vote to see how many Senate Democrats vote to cut the military budget even if the end result is already known. It will show the strength of the left wing of the Democratic Party as the November election approaches. The Democratic Party not only needs to recapture the Oval Office. It also needs to recapture the Senate or it will be unable to implement any new

policies because a Senate under Republican control would block Democratic initiatives. The Democrats need four more seats in the 100-member chamber to control it next year. Can they win four new seats without enthusiastic support from the left wing of their party in the election campaign?

The Republican Party also has a dilemma. Opinion polls are clear that most Americans think the biggest threats to the country now are coronavirus, social injustice and the economy. Foreign threats like China are far down the list and you can't even find the Middle East on the list. The military budget eats a quarter of the American government budget, and so new monies to contain the virus and ease the economic crisis are increasing the government budget deficit.

Some Republican Party supporters now criticize American foreign and defense policy as too expensive and the military capabilities more than is needed. Organizations like the CATO Institute and the Charles Koch Institute urge a foreign policy of caution and restraint and an end to interventions in the Middle East. Journalist and writer Katrina vanden Heuvel wrote in the Washington Post last week that in the end the virus, the problems of social justice and the economy will change politics in Washington to make military budget cuts likely.

As we think about the future some years from now, greater American focus on China and a smaller military would mean that the United States will be less interested in the Middle East and have fewer capabilities to intervene there. Maybe Libya is already an example.