

The one thing Donald Trump is right about — and that should scare you

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Donald Trump could be the only presidential candidate talking sense about for the American military's budget. That should scare everyone.

"I'm gonna build a military that's gonna be much stronger than it is right now," the real-estate-mogul-turned-tautological-demagogue said on *Meet the Press*. "It's gonna be so strong, nobody's gonna mess with us. But you know what? We can do it for a lot less."

He's right.

US military spending is out of control. The Defence Department budget for 2016 is \$573-billion. President Barack Obama's 2017 proposal ups it to \$582-billion. By comparison, China spent around \$145-billion and Russia around \$40-billion in 2015. Moscow would have spent more, but the falling price of oil, sanctions and the ensuing economic crisis stayed its hand.

As Trump has pointed out many times, Washington can build and maintain an amazing military arsenal for a fraction of what it's paying now. He's also right about one of the causes of the bloated budget: expensive prestige weapons systems such as the Littoral Combat Ship and the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

The much-maligned F-35 will cost at least \$1.5-trillion during the 55 years that its manufacturer, Lockheed Martin, expects it to be flying. That number is up \$500-billion from the original high estimate. But with a long list of problems plaguing the stealth fighter, that price will most likely grow.

"I hear stories," Trump said in a speech before the New Hampshire primary, "like they're ordering missiles they don't want because of politics, because of special interests, because the company that makes the missiles is a contributor."

America's defence is crucial. But something is wrong when Washington is spending almost five times as much as its rivals and throwing away billions on untested weapon systems. Most of the other presidential hopefuls agree. "We can't just pour vast sums back into the Pentagon," Senator Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) said during a campaign stop in South Carolina.

Cruz promised to rein in the military, audit the Pentagon and figure out why it's spending so much cash. Then he promised to add 125 000 troops to the Army, 177 ships to the Navy and expand the Air Force by 20%.

Cruz wouldn't put a price tag on these additions. But his plan would likely up the annual defence budget by tens of billions of dollars — if not hundreds of billions. One military expert, Benjamin Friedman of the CATO Institute, estimated that the Cruz plan would cost roughly \$2.6-trillion over the next eight years.

Ballistic-missile-launching submarines aren't cheap, for example, and Cruz wants 12 of them. "If you think it's too expensive to defend this nation," Cruz said, "try not defending it."

He's not alone. Senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) wants to revitalise the Navy, double down on the troubled F-35 and develop a new amphibious assault vehicle. Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, like Cruz, wanted to reform military spending while increasing the Pentagon budget by \$1-trillion over the next 10 years.

Ohio Governor John Kasich might be expected to have a more reasonable stance. After all, he sat on the House Armed Services Committee for almost 18 years, where he slashed budgets and challenged wasteful Pentagon projects.

But that past is a liability for him. The Super PAC that backed Bush funded a string of attack ads accusing Kasich of going soft on defence. Not wanting to appear weak, the governor now talks about increasing defence spending by \$102-billion a year.

Even the Democrats are in on the game. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has yet to propose a military budget, but she has long pledged strong support for the troops. Meanwhile, she is calling for an independent commissioner to audit the Pentagon for waste, fraud and abuse — the usual suspects.

Senator Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) is one candidate who has a clear record in terms of the Pentagon budget. He wants to reduce the U.S. nuclear arsenal and has long supported a 50% cut in defence spending.

At the same time, however, Sanders seems to tolerate the \$1.5-trillion albatross, the F-35. Which makes sense if you consider that Vermont could lose a lot of jobs if the F-35 disappeared. Sanders persuaded the jet's manufacturer to put a research centre in Vermont and bring 18 jets to the state National Guard.

Sanders has a history of protecting military contractors — if they bring jobs to his state. When he was mayor of Burlington in the 1980s, he pushed its police force to arrest nonviolent protesters at a local General Electric plant. The factory produced Gatling guns and also was one of the largest employers in the area.

Yet, Sanders ideological beliefs can sometimes colour his views. He was chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee in 2014 as scandal swept the Department of Veterans Affairs. Even as many VA supporters called for reforms, Sanders defended the hospital system because he felt conservatives were attacking a major government social-welfare agency.

He still defends his stewardship of the committee. “When I was chairman, what we did is pass a \$15-billion piece of legislation,” Sanders said during a recent debate with Clinton. “We went further than any time in recent history in improving the healthcare of the men and women in this country who put their lives on the line to defend us.”

In the age of terrorism and Islamic State bombers, the prevailing political wisdom holds that appearing soft on defence can lose a candidate the general election. For many of the 2016 presidential candidates, looking strong means spending a ton of cash. Even if you’re from the party that holds fiscal responsibility as its cornerstone.

But Trump doesn’t care about any of that. In speech after speech, he has called out politicians and defence contractors for colluding to build costly weapons systems at the price of national security.

During a radio program last October, for example, Trump called out the trouble-ridden F-35. “[Test pilots are] saying it doesn’t perform as well as our existing equipment, which is much less expensive,” Trump said. “So when I hear that, immediately I say we have to do something, because you know, they’re spending billions.”

Like so many Trump plans, the specifics are hazy. But on this issue, he’s got the right idea.

In a political climate full of fear of foreign threats and gung-ho about the military, it could take a populist strongman like Trump to deliver the harsh truth: When it comes to the military, the United States can do so much more with so much less.