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Reagan Redux at the Pentagon

Why Trump is attracted to Cold War tactics, including big defense spending

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WASHINGTON—Many of President Donald Trump’s personal touchstones harken back to the 1980s, when he found his financial fortune and mojo as an American celebrity. So perhaps it’s no surprise that his style and flash—including his friends and his homes—reflect the glitz and hubris of the era often named after Trump’s self-proclaimed political hero and lodestar, Ronald Reagan.

This fealty to a certain image of Reagan is evident in Trump’s recent declarations about the military budget. Last week the president announced he would ask Congress for an “historic” \$54 billion increase in defense spending over 2017 levels, “to rebuild the depleted military of the United States of America,” sending a message of “American strength, security and resolve” to the rest of the world.

The White House says the \$54 billion would be a 10 percent hike over the spending caps put into place by Congress in 2011. But much of this rhetoric may be misleading. As White House budget director Mick Mulvaney later pointed out, Trump’s numbers would raise the defense budget to \$603 billion, just 3 percent higher than the \$584 billion spent by the end of fiscal year 2017 in September, and representing an increase of just slightly more than the current 2.5 percent rate of inflation.

That’s just one of a number of baseline assumptions, says Gordon Adams, a defense budget expert and former Office of Management and Budget official in the Clinton administration. To be sure, it’s complicated. For example, the caps imposed by the Budget Control Act in 2011 (which are supposed to trigger the infamous “sequestration” cuts) have been raised for three years to accommodate past congressional spending desires, and the Overseas Contingency Operations budget has raised spending well over the caps, too. That shifts the baseline around a bit.

“The amount of increase is in the eye of the beholder,” Gordon tells *TAC*. No kidding: the *New York Times* released a “fact check” and a chart, based on numbers from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, showing that in Reagan’s first year in office (1981), he increased the budget a whopping 25 percent, far above Trump’s “historic” hike.

Meanwhile, Sen. John McCain, who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee, dismissed Trump’s plans as insufficient. McCain’s own budget plan calls for \$640 billion in base defense spending in FY 2018, growing to over \$740 billion in FY 2022.

“It did surprise me that he didn’t want more,” noted Dan Grazier, military budget analyst for the Project on Government Oversight (POGO), which advocates for reforming the Pentagon’s annual feeding frenzy. “When people on the Armed Services Committee are complaining that it isn’t enough, that’s a hopeful sign.”

Unlike Reagan, however, Trump is disinclined to raise the national debt in order to increase defense spending. And unlike the Obama era, Trump appears prepared to eschew previous deals with Democrats in order to raise the caps and send more dollars to the Pentagon. In years past, Democrats made agreements with Republicans to increase as much of the budget on the non-discretionary domestic side as they did on the military side, said Adams.

“The dollar-for-dollar adjustment was a function of the political balance,” he pointed out. “We don’t have that political balance anymore.”

Officials with knowledge of the president’s plan said that in order to pay for this “massive buildup,” there would be severe cuts—as much as 30 percent to the State Department’s foreign aid and diplomacy budgets, including major restructuring and even elimination of programs. The Environmental Protection Agency, a big target of Trump to begin with, would also take a 24 percent cut in its \$8.1 billion budget, say sources.

The United States currently spends about \$50 billion annually on the State Department and foreign assistance, a shadow of what the Pentagon spends each year.

“He ran on a platform of increasing the size, but not the cost of the military,” points out Ben Friedman, defense and homeland security fellow at the Cato Institute. “He’s fulfilling his campaign promises and he’s a Republican and this is a standard Republican position, not to raise deficit spending.”

But many suggest that this scenario, in which diplomacy and foreign assistance would have to be the sacrificial lamb, almost guarantees that Trump’s budget plan will get push back from Democrats—and even a few Republicans. Some have already called it dead on arrival. But with enough Republicans in the House and Senate willing to cut other areas of the budget to increase military outlays while staying under previous caps, State Department programs may be the first to take a hit. “They don’t have lobbyists hanging around on Capitol Hill to save those bucks,” said Adams. “That’s been true for decades.”

So far the details of how Trump plans to engage in this “rebuilding” of the military are thin. The Associated Press said the boost would go to big displays of power: new ships, aircraft, and fighters. During the campaign Trump borrowed heavily from Heritage Foundation white papers (not unlike Reagan once did) and has talked about increasing the size of the Navy from 274 to 350 ships, adding 60,000 soldiers to the Army, and allowing the Marines to expand to a wartime footing of 36 battalions. During a speech last week, he vowed to increase the current fleet of 10 aircraft carriers to a dozen.

Sources with knowledge of how these budgets work say it’s not how much is spent that matters—but how it’s spent. After all these showy, big-ticket items are paid for there will be very little money left in the president’s proposal for more immediate needs, like basic maintenance for existing ships, aircraft, and vehicles. Up to half of the current fleet of F-18 fighter planes have been grounded due to maintenance problems, for example. This might be fine if the F-35 joint strike fighter aircraft were off the ground, but with the replacement plane delayed, there are gaps in training and readiness, particularly for pilots.

Temptations of Power

Trump’s recent spending announcements, coupled with the general themes he’s hewed to during the campaign, appear to be part of an opening salvo in the coming budget fights with Congress. But there’s more to it. Trump seems to think Reagan’s own approach to facing down the Soviets and winning the Cold War—pouring money into the military industrial complex and turning around the nation’s patriotic malaise with soaring, muscular rhetoric—will work in 2017. If such a program can generate jobs and pump life into the economy, even better.

“Ronald Reagan made the argument that the only way to win the Cold War was peace through strength,” noted Gordon Adams. The phrase became a mainstay of GOP platforms with Reagan further explaining in 1983 that “to be prepared for war...is one of the most effective means of preserving peace.” Of course the now shopworn maxim has limits: as Andrew Bacevich has noted, it easily becomes “peace through war” because such a formidable posture “breeds the temptation to put that power to work.”

But Trump isn’t likely to be thinking in those terms. He is instead recalling Reagan psyching out the Russians and forcing the Soviet Union into a free fall that ended in its collapse a few years after the Gipper left office. Trump may similarly want to confront adversaries such as ISIS, Iran, North Korea, and China—and despite theories to the contrary, maybe even Putin’s Russia, too.

“Shades of Ronald Reagan—that is what I thought [when I heard his speech],” said Adams. “Because in a way this is a Reagan redux. Here we go again, as Reagan said himself, in the truest sense.”

But when Reagan came into office, the military really was in a bad state and had been—readiness and capability-wise, but especially culturally—since the end of the Vietnam War. There was a lot to do to bring it back to its proverbial glory. And unlike Trump’s vision, Reagan went into deficit spending to pay for it.

It's "a funny irony," says Adams. "We're said to have 'dismantled' the military but it's simply not true. The United States today has the biggest, baddest, most ready military in the world." The military may be tired from repeated deployments and in need of the aforementioned maintenance and upgrades, but it isn't "beleaguered," critics of a new buildup say.

"I think he has a worldview that is not truly coherent; I guess people call it 'Jacksonian,'" Cato's Friedman suggested to *TAC*, noting that Trump's foreign-policy positions seem to recall the seventh U.S. president, a man well prepared to defend the nation, but not interested in taking up messianic foreign adventures to spread American liberalism or seek global hegemony. "But it is militaristic. [Trump] has bragged about being militaristic. Speak loudly, carry a big stick."

"I also think he has more of a worshipful attitude toward the military than most—until of course, [the military] conflicts with his own ego," says Friedman.

Draining the Swamp?

Advocates of foreign-policy restraint can be pleased that Trump so far seems averse to starting wars and nation building. Yet for the military-industrial complex, staying home can also be very good news. Building up for war is just as good for business as fighting one, maybe even better.

"The whole system wants to get as much money as humanly possible," said Grazier, who after tours in Iraq and Afghanistan retired from the Marine Corps as a captain, joined POGO in 2015. "There is a big, concerted effort not only to keep things as they are but to get more."

That effort includes millions of dollars of political contributions and lobbying resources that big civilian contractors—including Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, and Raytheon—hope will start returning on investment as these budget battles begin. According to the Center for Responsible Politics, since 2009 these heavy hitters have contributed \$42 million to political candidates, most of them perched on Congressional armed services and appropriations committees.

Rep. Mac Thornberry, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, for example, received \$393,850 from defense interests in the 2016 election cycle, almost seven times as much as the country's median household income. Sen. McCain, who has scoffed that Trump's ideal military budget is too small, took \$312,365 from defense interests in the last cycle.

These contributions to some of the most visible legislators represent just a small fraction of all the money flowing from defense interests—nearly \$127 million in the last year alone, including 748 lobbyists representing 218 clients on Capitol Hill. It's a swamp Trump seems unlikely to succeed in draining.

Few in Washington, besides POGO and their allies, are publicly making the case that overheated rhetoric will continue to drive irresponsible military spending. Still the president seems confident using 1980's retro themes of bigger, bolder, and stronger, whether the spending is destined for Main Street USA or much farther away. He'll deal with the costs—and the messy details—later.

