



Trump to Demand \$54 Billion Hike in Military Spending, But "Austerity Makes the Best Auditor"

Trump says government has to learn to do more with less, but the military doesn't.

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President Trump promised a "historic increase in defense spending" in remarks to the National Governor's Association (NGA), suggesting concomitant cuts in non-defense spending (excluding entitlements) would cover the increase. Trump described what would be his first federal budget proposal as a "public safety and national security budget."

The Trump budget is set to propose a \$54 billion dollar increase (nearly 10 percent) in defense spending, to \$603 billion, and a cut in non-defense discretionary spending to \$462 billion, according to White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Director Mick Mulvaney.

Mulvaney described the budget, which will be submitted to Congress next month, as an expression of Trump's campaign agenda. "It will show the president is keeping his promises and doing exactly what he said he was going to do," Mulvaney said, according to *The New York Times*. "We are taking his words and turning them into policies and dollars."

Mulvaney's December appointment to lead OMB was hailed by budget hawks, as he had been a vocal advocate for spending cuts while a member of Congress. As recently as last summer, Mulvaney campaigned on the idea that military spending should not be exempt. "If we are going to balance the budget, then all spending needs to be scrutinized, including the Pentagon," Mulvaney wrote in a Facebook post, according to the *Greenville News*. Mulvaney's congressional Facebook page has since been deactivated.

Mulvaney's 2016 Democratic opponent attacked him for his position on military spending cuts, saying the 2011 sequester that Mulvaney supported, which slowed down the rate of growth of military spending, meant Republicans had "gutted the military when it was needed the most." The position illustrates the difficulty any remaining budget hawks will have in resisting Trump's budget proposals or offering politically-feasible counter-proposals.

Trump's proposed massive military spending increase cannot even be reasonably interpreted as an extreme first offer meant to spur negotiations, because there is little will in Congress for spending cuts of any kind, let alone those of the military. That's unfortunate, because, as Benjamin Friedman wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 2011, "austerity is the best auditor." Responsible, managed cuts in military spending could improve military readiness by forcing much-needed reprioritizations. The president's proposed military spending increase is unfortunate, especially given Trump's early focus on a number of military contracts he considered overpriced. Those contracts are a kind of microcosm of the wider military budget. Increasing military spending will only make such contracts more bloated.

Outside of the military, Trump appears to understand the value of spending cuts in increasing government efficiency, or at least to have a grasp on the rhetoric. "We're going to do more with less and make government lean and accountable to the people," Trump said in his NGA remarks. "The government must learn to tighten its belt, something families all across the country have had to learn to do," Trump said, "unfortunately, but they've had to learn to do it and they've done it well."

As William Ruger, the Charles Koch Institute's vice president of policy and research explained at a CPAC panel this weekend, conservatives have a tendency to treat the military bureaucracy as an "honorary member of the private sector," ignoring that it was prone to the same waste and inefficiency as the rest of government. Throughout the presidential campaign, many conservatives questioned Trump's credentials. He certainly shares the blind spot of many conservatives when it comes to military spending, and seems to have helped Mulvaney develop one of his own.