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Kentucky voices: Military spending eclipsing more urgent needs

By Kerby Neill

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Watching our current Congress in action evokes old memories of joining a church work team to clean and repair a family's home in southern Kentucky.

The family, which would be away while we worked, included several children, a mother who was blind, and a father who could only find occasional work. The home's furnishings were probably gleaned from trash piles.

We literally scraped food and dirt from the floor with putty knives. The two exterior walls of the children's room were covered with decrepit siding nailed to corner posts. There were gaps you could throw a baseball through.

We worked the better part of a day, cleaning, insulating, and installing drywall, then several of us climbed to the attic to look for signs of leaks in the roof. There, we came upon the father's ample collection of guns. We shook our heads in disbelief.

What led this poor father to his misplaced priorities we had no idea, but the priorities of our current Congress aren't very different.

In a frenzy to cut discretionary spending, with entitlements next, defense spending is declared off the table, even though our military budget is larger than the rest of the world's combined.

What values require such an arsenal? Who is poised to invade our ocean-protected shores? Maybe it is a country from which we are not protected by such vast moats — Mexico or that saber-rattler, Canada. There are terrorism threats, but the nature of terrorism is to attack in ways that avoid confronting military power. We defend against terrorism by means of alert intelligence agencies, citizens and police and by extensive international cooperation.

In the same week that Congress was debating cuts in education from Head Start to college financial aid, in health from prenatal care to critical research and in most programs that support our most vulnerable citizens, the Defense Department announced a \$35 billion contract to Boeing for 200 new tanker planes to refuel U.S. fighters and bombers in midair.

That's \$175 million per plane. How many far-flung misadventures will these planes allow us to support?

For years, the Quakers and the War Resisters League, among others, have fought to help us realize what economists call the opportunity costs of our runaway military spending.

How many schools, how many clinics, how many clean energy facilities can be built for the cost of one fighter jet, one submarine or one day of U.S. presence in Iraq or Afghanistan?

In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower warned us, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold

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and are not clothed." Eisenhower, a former general, provided his own list of the opportunity costs, the alternatives to various weapons in terms of schools, hospitals, food and housing.

We ignored Eisenhower's later warnings of an evolving military/industrial complex, and military spending became a national addiction which slowed only slightly after losing its Cold War rationale.

We pay a huge domestic price for military overspending and in these hard times we risk weakening our nation more by cutting core services than by deep military cuts.

Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the conservative Cato Institute, recently authored *The Power Problem: How America Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free*, a sharp critique of how we weaken ourselves through military overspending while failing to invest in infrastructure, education and the care of our citizens at home.

March 19 marked the eighth anniversary of the unfinanced Iraq War that left America fiscally depleted as we entered the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. Cutting military spending won't erase the budget deficit, but if we can't get our priorities straight in hard times, when will we?

It is time for Congress to put the guns in the attic on the table and give serious attention to the needs of the family living downstairs.

Kerby Neill serves on the board of the Central Kentucky Council for Peace and Justice and is co-author of the forthcoming book, *Binding Their Wounds: America's Assault on Its Veterans*.

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