



A farewell to (a few) arms
Ray Acheson, [Reaching Critical Will](#), on the Proposed US Military Budget

On 6 April 2009, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates released a \$534 billion military budget proposal for 2010 (not including the Iraq or Afghanistan wars) that attempts to move away from so-called “Cold War” technologies to those needed to fight “insurgencies” in Afghanistan and Iraq. His plans are being welcomed by some who support arms control as a “credible effort to bring new discipline and focus to military spending after the unrestrained, inchoate years of the Bush administration” ([New York Times editorial](#)).

The money

However, few who either oppose or support the cuts have noted that the US military budget went up again this year. [2009's budget](#) was \$515.4 billion—without including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, nuclear weapon research, maintenance, and production, and veteran affairs.

Writing on [AfterDowningStreet.org](#), David Swanson noted the radically different spin put on the budget by mainstream media and business sources. He pointed out, for example, that [MSNBC's Rachel Maddow said](#), “... that thump-thump-thump sound that you heard in the distance as [Gates revealed the budget] was the sound of executives at all the big defense contractors passing out.” Meanwhile, MarketWatch, in an article entitled, “[Pentagon still a cash cow despite budget cuts](#),” quoted the Wall Street analysts’ perspective: “there’s still plenty of funding for the country’s top military contractors.”

“Lockheed Martin had the best outcome from Gates’ budget decisions, there was also strong support for Northrop Grumman’s and General Dynamics’ shipbuilding businesses,” said Douglas Harned, an analyst with Bernstein Research. “Notably, there were no indications of plans to bring budgets down significantly in 2011.”

Likewise, [Janes noted](#), “Major US defence stocks were raised out of the doldrums by Defense Secretary Robert Gates’ budget proposals thanks to the lifting of a degree of uncertainty and proposals that were not as dramatic as the markets expected.”

The programs

An [editorial in the New York Times](#), which overall advocated for more spending on weapons of “use” rather than a reduction of spending, did at least note, “Scrapping wasteful weapons programs is essential, but how much better it would be if they were never built at all. The Pentagon’s procurement system has so run amok that 70 percent of the weapons were over budget last year by a total \$296 billion.”

A good example of this is the Airborne Laser—a chemical laser mounted on a Boeing 747. No, really. The Airborne Laser programme suffered from chronic cost and schedule overruns—[according to Ellen Tauscher](#), chair of the House Armed Services strategic forces subcommittee: four years and billions of dollars over. Government funding for the programme has been reduced for the past several years, though the Missile Defense Agency continued requesting more money, shrilly arguing that its first “live shoot-down test” couldn’t afford to be postponed any longer, for the security of the nation.

In 2006, former Missile Defense Agency chief Lt. Gen. Henry “Trey” Obering, III, explained the value of the Airborne Laser: “I believe we are building the forces of good to beat the forces of evil.... We are taking a major step in giving the American people their first light saber.” Remarkably on the rather



awkward aesthetics of the weapon system, he also commented, “This is not the prettiest aircraft I have seen. It is not supposed to be pretty. It is supposed to be mean.”

Thankfully, Gates is recommending this programme be cut, along with the deployment of interceptor missiles to the Ground-based Midcourse Defense system in Alaska, one segment of the US missile “defense” system. For the most part, tests of the Alaska system have failed miserably. Rockets usually fail to make it out of their launch tubes and kill vehicles have failed to separate from their rockets when they do make it out. A year ago, the Missile Defense Agency estimated the Ground-based segment would cost about \$50 billion.

However, as the NYT editorial also argued, “He should have cut deeper than \$1.4 billion into the unproven missile defense program.” Likewise, giving a [testimony](#) before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capability, William Hartung of the [New America Foundation](#) outlined six weapon systems that could be cut “without undermining [US] security,” which included missile defence as a whole. He argued, “This year marks the 26th anniversary of President Ronald Reagan’s Star Wars speech, and there has yet to be realistic test that indicates that we can reliably shoot down incoming nuclear warheads launched from a long-range ballistic missile.”

Unfortunately, Hartung went on to assert, “The elements of the missile defense budget that involve defending against ICBMs can be eliminated without harming our security in any way. There is some indication that mid-range systems designed to protect troops or nearby allies from medium-range missiles may prove to be more effective.” In reality, the vast majority of anti-missile technologies have faced cost overruns and delays. Even more importantly, their development, testing, and deployment will have harsh consequences for international relations, particularly between Russia and the United States, and for the US economy.

Overall, the varying reactions to Gates’ proposed military budget are virtually devoid of any criticism of what the \$534 billion is spent on—weapons of war. Weapons that are used in the wars that the United States instigates, wars which have another budget all their own. On the contrary, even those supposedly in support of arms control and disarmament have recommended the military stop wasting money on weapon systems they don’t use and spend it on weapons they do use. Further, no one seems to have questioned the need or right of the United States to use these weapons—that the US would need different types of weapons to fight new types of wars is accepted as fact. For all the talk of giving the military budget a “massive overhaul,” no one has referred to the distinction between offensive and non-offensive defence, the latter focusing on defence systems that protect a state rather than on armed attack against other states.

And no, missile “defence” is not a form of non-offensive defence, as its methods and means are inherently offensive. For example, as has [even been argued by pro-missile “defence” advocates](#), “The mere fact that missile defense ships could be deployed to war zones as part of larger naval armadas gives them an immediately recognizable offensive dimension.” Further, as [Mike Moore pointed out](#), “The infrastructure for a ballistic missile defense system is, in large measure, the same as that needed for an *offensive* anti-satellite system.”

Finally, as the military budget continues to grow even in a time of the global financial crisis, where is the money for everything else a country needs to survive going to come from? Why isn’t anybody asking that?