Opinion
Guest Voices



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by Dwayne David Paul

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March 7, 2023

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In December, even as the country was still reeling from soaring food and fuel prices, Congress authorized an $858 billion budget in the National Defense Authorization Act, increasing military spending by $80 billion — $45 billion more than President Joe Biden requested. If the U.S. military were a country, its 2023 budget would make it the 18th-largest economy in the world.

It was the latest instance of the U.S. leading the world in what Pope Francis has called the "madness" of prioritizing military dominance over human needs and international relations.

It's not just that we spend an astronomical amount on warfare, it's that nobody else does. As author and militarism expert William Hartung notes, the $80 billion increase between fiscal years 2022 and 2023 is greater than the total military expenditure of every other nation but China, which itself spends less than half as much on militarism as we do. According to the World Bank, among G20 nations — which account for 80% of global gross domestic product — only Saudi Arabia (6.6%) and Russia (4.1%) devote a larger fraction of their national economic output to military spending than the United States' 3.5%.

The power of the military, and the web of interests surrounding it, is incompatible with democracy and human development.

The urgency here is not just that money given to the Pentagon is money not given to human services agencies. As with the example of nuclear modernization, the budget priorities move us further from peace and toward irreparable conflict, as Francis has continually reminded us.

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Perhaps most concerning from the standpoint of Catholic social teaching is the Biden administration's commitment to advancing nuclear arms. This year's budget continues a program of so-called "modernization" of the nuclear stockpile begun under President Barack Obama, who inaugurated the 30-year, $1.25 trillion plan. One key objective is to develop lower-yield, allegedly more precise nuclear weapons that are more likely to be deployed in conventional wars.

The United States' next-generation nuclear arms buildup coincides with Francis' escalation of Catholic social teaching's opposition to even possessing nuclear arms.

As Professor Joseph Fahey of Manhattan College notes, Cold-War-era Catholic social teaching from the U.S. bishops' conference captured in their 1983 document, "The Challenge of Peace," did not condemn the possession of nuclear arms as inherently evil. After much debate, the group instead opted for Pope John Paul II's 1982 compromise formulation that it was morally permissible to keep nuclear weapons for the sake of deterrence within a framework of gradual disarmament.

By contrast, in his address to a 2017 symposium on nuclear disarmament, Francis said of nuclear weapons, "The threat of their use, as well as their very possession, is to be firmly condemned." Here, and more extensively in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis is clear: Even the threat of both large-scale and mutual destruction are intrinsically evil and cannot be divorced from the development and maintenance of nuclear arsenals.

Militarism, especially the expansion of weapons of mass destruction, undermines the possibility of a human family. Peace, as Francis sees it, can only flourish where there are abundant investments in diplomacy and basic human needs.

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Yet, for American politicians, far from asking, "How will we pay for that?" when it comes to defense spending, no even one knows what "that" entails. The Pentagon has never passed an audit. In fact, it is only in the last five years that it began to attempt to do so, after years of refusing to obey the Congressional mandate. A week before Thanksgiving, the Pentagon revealed it failed its fifth consecutive audit.

In its first three years of even giving the appearance of compliance, the auditors issued so-called "disclaimer of opinion" reports, meaning military officials provided insufficient data for auditors to reach an informed conclusion.

Starting in the 1990s, the federal government mandated that its agencies pass an annual audit. For more than 20 years, while other agencies fell in line with the new accountability standards, the Department of Defense did not. This prompted Congress in 2010 to tie the next year's funding to a seven-year plan to come into compliance. They used the fruits of this opportunity to hide $125 billion of waste from Congress.

The Defense Department's audit is a combination of 27 probes into its network of agencies that are responsible for more than $7 trillion of assets and liabilities. The comptroller's annual report found that only seven of the 27 met generally accepted accounting standards.

Once again, when asked to demonstrate that it had a handle on waste fraud, and abuse, the Department of Defense's only real answer was for us to have faith and give it even more resources to cast into the void. Democracy is impossible without public accountability.

Over half of this year's discretionary budget goes toward funding warfare despite the proliferation of data showing the deterioration of poor and working-class people's lives. While the budget for the current fiscal year has already been signed, Congress still controls the federal government's spending. People of faith should contact their legislators to denounce these spending priorities, and voice support for past efforts to take money from Defense spending to invest in jobs, health care and education.