Opinion
Editorial

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by NCR Editorial Staff

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Jan. 1 is marked each year as the World Day of Peace, a tradition begun by Pope Paul VI in 1967 and continued by every pope since. Across decades and vastly

different global moments, each has insisted on the same foundational truth: Peace is not simply the absence of war, but the long and demanding work of building justice, protecting human dignity, fostering dialogue and addressing the conditions that give rise to violence.

Now in its 59th year, the World Day of Peace was intended by Paul VI to serve as a moment of moral reckoning, not a ceremonial pause — an annual opportunity to examine whether public choices align with professed values. That question needs to be asked urgently today: *How have we fared? Where are we now?*

Government priorities do not remain abstract. They are translated, year after year, into money, line items and budgets. Values become measurable. Commitments become traceable. And by that measure, the answer is sobering. Even as Catholic social teaching has deepened its articulation of peace — rooted in justice, human rights, care for the vulnerable and reconciliation — U.S. public investment has moved steadily in the opposite direction, normalizing militarization as the default setting of governance.

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That normalization carries a price tag. As one year ends and another begins, Congress has already signaled what kind of nation it expects the United States to be. In December, Congress passed the Fiscal Year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, authorizing $900.6 billion in national security spending. The new year opens in Washington not with reflection or restraint, but with war readiness reaffirmed as the baseline of public life.

That figure alone should give us pause. But $900 billion is not what the United States will actually spend on war and national security next year. It is only the most visible portion of a much larger system.

When national security spending is counted honestly — not just the Pentagon budget, but veterans' care, nuclear weapons programs, intelligence agencies, homeland security, military retirement, foreign military assistance and interest on past war debt — total U.S. military and national security spending for FY2026 rises to

an estimated $1.5-$1.7 trillion.

This is not a temporary response to a crisis. It is a standing condition — a perpetual war state of mind so normalized that it has become difficult even to imagine what a non-warlike budget might look like.

The distortion becomes clearer when placed alongside other national priorities. The entire U.S. Department of Education budget was roughly $268 billion in 2024, while Medicare totaled $848 billion in 2023. These comparisons reflect national choices about what we choose to protect, repair and invest in.

Nowhere is the distortion more apparent — or more dangerous — than in nuclear weapons spending. The FY2026 authorization includes roughly $34 billion for Department of Energy new and upgraded nuclear weapons programs alone, while long-term nuclear "modernization" costs are projected to approach $1 trillion over the next decade These weapons are unusable by any moral standard and indefensible by any coherent theory of security. Their sole purpose is perpetual threat.

This is not deterrence so much as institutionalized fear. Nuclear weapons require endless modernization and permanent readiness, locking future generations into a system they did not choose. Popes from Paul VI through Francis — and now Pope Leo XIV, who has called for an "unarmed and disarming peace" — have consistently condemned nuclear weapons as incompatible with human dignity and human survival.

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The costs of war do not end with weapons. Veterans' care now exceeds $440 billion annually, reflecting the long-term human consequences of past conflicts. Together, nuclear weapons spending and veterans' care reveal the full moral arc of militarization: enormous sums devoted first to preparation and destruction, followed by decades of repair. Peace, meanwhile, remains rhetorically affirmed but structurally underfunded.

When more than one-third of federal spending is tied directly or indirectly to war and national security functions, the United States is no longer simply defending itself — it is sustaining a self-perpetuating national security state. Such a system narrows democratic debate, distances citizens from consequence, and frames policy choices as inevitabilities rather than moral decisions. Over time, democratic habits erode and moral imagination atrophies.

Jan. 1 was never meant to be ceremonial. Pope Paul VI established the World Day of Peace as a summons — to pause, to tell the truth, and to choose again. After nearly six decades of annual appeals insisting that peace must be built through justice, dignity, dialogue and restraint, the gap between what we proclaim and what we fund has become impossible to ignore.

Pope Leo's call toward an "unarmed and disarming peace" underscores the urgency of this moment. Budgets reveal who we are becoming. And ours now assume war as permanent, militarization as normal, and nuclear annihilation as a manageable risk. If peace is to be more than a word spoken once a year, honesty must replace habit. Because when war becomes the baseline — not only in policy, but in our imagination — something in us has already broken.