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THE DEFENSE BILL, WITH ITS PRIORITIES WRONG, DESERVES A VETO

(Updating *Backgrounder* No. 757, "Four Imperatives for Cutting the Defense Budget,"
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Washington's creeping political paralysis has overtaken the defense budget. After weeks of negotiation among House and Senate conferees, a defense authorization bill soon will be on George Bush's desk. Like other budget compromises forged in recent weeks, it ducks the tough issues and bows to special interests. It gets its priorities wrong and thus short-changes the nation's defense needs. The issue thus is not the amount being spent on defense; the \$289 billion voted by Congress is an acceptable number. The issue rather is how the money is spent. As such, Bush should veto the bill and demand a new version.

Up to now, it seems that Bush and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney have been part of the problem. The two apparently signed off on a deal sacrificing a robust Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) and deployment of the rail-mobile MX missile in return for \$4.1 billion for the B-2 *Stealth* bomber program next year. There should be no tradeoff between these weapons systems. If Congress gave the Administration no choice but a tradeoff, then the White House and Pentagon have chosen wrong. America's top strategic priority should be a defense against missile attacks — from a Saddam Hussein or from a fanatic who may gain control in Moscow. Worse, the SDI-for-bomber tradeoff may not even benefit the B-2. House Armed Services Committee Chairman Les Aspin insists that none of the B-2 money can be used to buy more planes. Before the White House is completely snookered — helping to kill SDI and rail-MX in return for empty promises on B-2 — Bush and Cheney should reverse course. They should stick to their guns on SDI and rail-MX deployment, even if it means less money for B-2.

Alarming Soviet Weapons. The abandonment of SDI and rail-MX comes just as Soviet strategic nuclear modernization programs are accelerating at an alarming and unexplained pace. The Soviet Union last year produced 140 new Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) to America's nine. This number is up from an average of 116 Soviet ICBMs per year from 1982 to 1988. Moscow's most potent missile, the SS-18 *Satan*, is being replaced by two new models. One model carries ten warheads, each considerably more accurate and powerful than those on the SS-18s. This upgrade allows Moscow to continue threatening virtually America's entire land-based missile arsenal in a first strike, even if the SS-18 force is cut in half from 308 to 154 missiles after a START strategic arms agreement. A second new model of the SS-18 carries one huge, 20 megaton warhead (the largest U.S. missile warhead is less than a single megaton). This is a sheer terror weapon, used to threaten American cities, create tremendous amounts of electromagnetic energy to disrupt U.S. communications, and attack the most protected military targets. Whatever Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's intentions, the Soviet military continues to prepare for nuclear war.

Moscow also is deploying two newer missiles, the SS-24 *Scalpel* and SS-25 *Stiletto*. These are mobile, deployed on trucks or railcars to avoid detection and targeting by American forces. By contrast, America has yet to field a single mobile missile. This makes it so difficult to understand Cheney's decision to give up deployment of the rail-mobile version of the MX *Peacekeeper* missile. Rail-MX deployment could begin next year, providing the U.S. with an arsenal of secure, land-based missiles virtually immune to attack if dispersed. Among U.S. strategic modernization options, rail-MX also is the least expensive, at about \$7 billion for the entire program. This compares to an additional \$33 billion which would have to be spent to complete the 75-plane B-2 bomber program.

Outmaneuvered By Congress. More puzzling than the White House's concession on rail-MX is the decision to accept only \$2.89 billion in SDI funding. Bush originally requested \$4.5 billion; Democrats, privately, say they were ready to give Bush \$3.0 billion. In the matter of funding, Cheney and the White House apparently were out-maneuvered. Worse still, Bush seems willing to accept congressional micromanagement of the SDI program, allowing Congress for the first time to divide the SDI budget into discrete programs, shunting funds into such programs as long-term research and development while shortchanging critical near-term technologies. The effect of this lower SDI budget and new congressional restrictions: 1) to delay a decision on SDI deployment by at least two years, or well beyond Bush's current term, and 2) to restrict the program to the 100 ground-based interceptors now permitted by the increasingly obsolete 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Such a system would be virtually useless against all but a small class of extremely limited or accidental attacks.

Unlike MX or *Midgetman* missiles, *Trident* submarines, or B-2 bombers, SDI's objective is not simply to deliver more nuclear warheads against targets in the Soviet Union. Only SDI has a defensive mission: protecting American military and ultimately civilian targets against missile attacks. If the Soviet Union ceases to be a major threat to the U.S., the rationale for the B-2, rail-MX, and a host of other programs may well disappear. The arguments for SDI will remain unassailable, particularly as more countries, including Saddam Hussein's Iraq, try to obtain nuclear weapon and ballistic missile technology.

Spending Wisely. There is little debate this year in Washington over the amount of the 1991 defense budget. Few question that Congress should authorize about \$289 billion for defense in fiscal 1991. This is \$24 billion — or 8 percent — less than 1990, even after adjusting for inflation. Only the most radical liberals in Congress still are recommending anything less.

This \$289 billion should be enough for America to meet its national defense requirements in 1991 — but only if dwindling defense dollars are spent wisely. This means countering Moscow's unremitting strategic nuclear buildup by deploying rail-MX. This means taking out an insurance policy against the Saddam Husseins by providing at least \$3.5 billion for SDI so Bush can decide on a deployment plan during his current term. The B-2 is a technological marvel, and justifiable in light of Moscow's continued strategic buildup — but not at the expense of SDI and rail-MX. It is not too late for Bush to straighten out his priorities. His first step towards this should be a veto of the defense bill. Bush has the strength to sustain a veto. The House yesterday approved the new defense authorization bill by 271 to 156 — short of the two-thirds majority needed to override a veto. Most House Republicans voted against the bill, sending Bush a strong veto message from his own party.

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