

CATO HANDBOOK FOR CONGRESS

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 108TH CONGRESS

CATO
INSTITUTE

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49. Cut Unneeded Weapon Systems

Congress should terminate or reduce procurement of the following unneeded weapon systems:

- the Air Force's F-22 fighter,
- the Navy's F/A-18E/F Super Hornet carrier-based fighter/attack aircraft,
- the Navy's Virginia-class submarine,
- the Marine Corps' V-22 tiltrotor transport aircraft, and
- the Army's Comanche helicopter.

New Threat Environment Requires a Reallocation of Resources

The war in Afghanistan following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks confirmed what the Bush administration and many defense analysts had anticipated: the forces, weapons, and tactics of the Cold War are not optimal for fighting new adversaries in the post-Cold War era. The war in Afghanistan was won with unmanned aerial vehicles providing reconnaissance and surveillance and special forces on the ground supporting attacking aircraft (the most efficient of which were long-range bombers) by calling in targets. Previously, the paradigm had been to use manned fighter aircraft to support large ground forces engaged against the adversary, with unmanned aerial vehicles playing a marginal role. The terrorist attacks and subsequent war showed that President Bush's initiative to transform the military to fight future threats was more vital than ever before.

Both in his campaign and in his first months in office, the president spoke of transforming the military by modernizing weapons selectively and moving beyond marginal improvements to radically new technologies. He also advocated a military defined less by size and more by mobility and the ability to deploy more easily and project power over long distances.

The president has terminated the Army's Crusader mobile artillery gun, which was too heavy to deploy easily. Yet, for the most part, vested interests have resisted the president's call to transform the nation's armed forces.

Congress should help the president modernize weapons selectively and skip a generation of technology by cutting unneeded or Cold War-era arms programs and reallocating resources to more urgent needs and research programs for futuristic weapons.

Cut Unneeded and Cold War-Era Weapons

Many weapons the Pentagon is currently procuring were originally designed during the Cold War (for example, the Marine Corps' V-22 tiltrotor aircraft). Some weapons now in development entered that process during the Cold War and were to be used against a threat that is now gone or never came to fruition (for example, the Army's Comanche helicopter and the Air Force's F-22 fighter). In addition, the tradition-bound military services are buying successors to Cold War systems (for example, the Navy's Virginia-class submarine and F-18E/F aircraft). Some weapons are too costly (for example, the F-22). Finally, both the executive branch and Congress build unneeded weapons to dole out pork to inefficient defense industries and favored congressional districts. Thus, inertia, tradition, and pork undermine the rational development and procurement of weapon systems. Congress should terminate or reduce procurement of the following "white elephant" weapons:

F-22 Raptor and F/A-18E/F Tactical Fighters

The current generation of American aircraft (the Air Force's F-15 and F-16 and the Navy's F-14 and F-18C/D) will enjoy crushing air superiority over all other air forces for the foreseeable future. According to Eliot Cohen, director of the Strategic Studies Program at Johns Hopkins University and an acknowledged expert on air power, "There's not anybody who's going to be comparable to us for as long as you can see."

But the U.S. military services are currently developing or purchasing three new fighter aircraft (the Air Force's F-22, the Navy's F/A-18E/F, and the multiservice Joint Strike Fighter) at a cost of about \$340 billion. The three new fighter aircraft alone will consume a quarter of the Pentagon's annual budget for procuring new weapons and "crowd out" the purchase of weapons that should have a higher priority—for example, a modestly priced replacement for aging U.S. bombers. Thus, two of the

three aircraft—the F-22 and F/A-18E/F—should be terminated or purchased only in drastically reduced numbers.

The Air Force designed the stealthy F-22 aircraft primarily to fight futuristic Soviet fighters that were never built. The F-22 would replace the best air superiority fighter in the world today—the F-15C. The United States could maintain its current dominance of the skies well into the future using upgraded F-15Cs, superbly trained pilots, new munitions, and Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft (the best aircraft in the world for management of air battle and a potent force multiplier). No current or future threat to U.S. air superiority exists that would justify spending nearly \$63 billion for 341 F-22 aircraft. As a result, the aircraft will probably be used mainly for air-to-ground attack, which it is not optimally designed to do. (Besides, the United States already has the F-117 and B-2 planes to perform stealthy ground attack missions.) At nearly \$200 million for each aircraft, the F-22 is the most expensive, least needed fighter ever built.

Although the F/A-18E/F is an entirely different aircraft than the F/A-18C/D, it is not much of an improvement for about double the price (\$86 million for each E/F model). For example, although the E/F has a longer range and greater payload than the C/D, it still has a shorter range and smaller payload than the retired A-6 attack aircraft at a time when the aircraft carrier is being pushed farther out to sea by enemy mines, cruise missiles, and diesel submarines. Because the air-to-air threat environment is so low, the C/D model will most likely suffice for future air defense of the fleet until the stealthy Navy version of the Joint Strike Fighter comes on line. If a ground attack aircraft with longer range and greater payload is needed before the stealthy Navy Joint Strike Fighter is ready, a special naval version of the F-117 Nighthawk might provide an interim capability.

Virginia-Class Submarines

With the demise of the Soviet Union and the Russian submarine fleet rusting in port, the existing U.S. force of Seawolf and 688 Los Angeles-class vessels is unquestionably the best in the world and will remain so for the foreseeable future. No other navy in the world even comes close to U.S. undersea power. But the Navy has already begun constructing 30 new Virginia-class submarines (at an average cost of \$2.2 billion per ship) and decommissioning older 688 boats before their useful life is over. The Virginia-class submarines will, in most respects, be less capable than the Seawolf class—in size, speed, diving depth, and weapons capacity.

According to the U.S. General Accounting Office, the Navy could retain its goal of 55 submarines in the force by merely refueling the nuclear reactors of the older 688 boats. Moreover, the Navy justified hiking its force goal from 50 to 55 submarines on the basis of increased requirements for intelligence collection. During the Cold War the main target of intelligence gathering by U.S. submarines was the Soviet fleet. Because most of that fleet does not get out of port much anymore, the Pentagon has added more countries to the list of reconnaissance targets. Yet justifying the 55-boat goal on the basis of collecting intelligence is questionable. With the end of the Cold War, conventional threats to the U.S. Navy and the United States declined and so should have requirements for gathering intelligence on such threats; instead they have doubled since 1989. Although, in certain instances, the submarine can provide unique collection capabilities, the United States has many other more versatile assets for spying—for example, manned and unmanned aircraft and satellites—that can perform missions less expensively than \$2 billion submarines and are not limited to collection in littoral areas. The United States should reduce its submarine goal and terminate the Virginia-class line.

The V-22 Tiltrotor Aircraft

The V-22—which takes off (and lands) like a helicopter, then tilts its rotors and flies as a fixed-wing aircraft—transports Marines and their light equipment from amphibious ships to shore. The aircraft can go faster and farther than a CH-53 heavy-lift helicopter but cannot carry the heavy equipment the CH-53 can.

The V-22 program has been troubled by crashes and is 10 years behind schedule and \$15 billion over budget. In the 1980s and 1990s, senior officials from the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations, including Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, recommended that the aircraft be canceled. Because of the exorbitant cost of the aircraft, the first Bush administration tried to terminate the program, but Congress reinstated it. The V-22 is truly a vampire: despite the numerous crashes and the admission that the aircraft needs to be reengineered, the 2003 budget funds production at a low rate until a fix can be found.

At almost \$80 million per V-22 aircraft, transporting Marines and equipment to shore by air could be done much more cheaply by buying new versions of existing CH-53 rotary aircraft or even smaller helicopters like the Blackhawk CH-60. Besides, against a capable opponent, if faster V-22s transport Marines and their light equipment inland behind enemy

lines and if slower CH-53s carry their heavy equipment, the Marines may die before the heavy equipment reaches them.

Comanche Helicopter

The stealthy Comanche light reconnaissance (scout) and attack helicopter was originally designed to hunt Soviet tanks on the central plains of Europe. With the end of the Cold War and the demise of the threat of Soviet armored attack, the aircraft has been remarketed as the “quarterback of the digital battlefield”—that is, a disseminator of tactical reconnaissance information during battle. Suspicions naturally arise when the threat justifying a weapon collapses, but the system lives on and develops another mission.

The Comanche is supposed to replace the OH-58 Kiowa scout helicopter; the aircraft is also supposed to succeed the AH-1 Cobra light attack helicopter in Army divisions that do not have the Apache heavy attack helicopter. Even in the Gulf War against a Soviet-style armored force, the Apache killed tanks effectively, with no need for a scout helicopter. Besides, in the future, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and better information networks may render the manned reconnaissance helicopter obsolete. UAVs are in some ways better reconnaissance platforms than the Comanche. The unmanned aircraft are 15 percent faster, can loiter over an area five times longer without refueling, and do not expose pilots to enemy fire during usually dangerous reconnaissance missions. The AH-1 Cobra can be replaced by added purchases of an armed version of the OH-58 helicopter—the Kiowa Warrior—which performed well in the Gulf War.

At more than \$30 million per helicopter, the Comanche is a very expensive aircraft that can operate at night and in all weather. Although the Comanche was originally touted as inexpensive, it is now more expensive than the heavier Apache that has similar capabilities. The Apache is being upgraded substantially with digital technology and augmented firepower. The addition of the Longbow millimeter-wave radar will allow the Apache to operate at night and in most weather conditions. An Army with upgraded Apaches supplemented by added purchases of Kiowa Warriors should be able to deal effectively with the less-threatening post-Cold War environment.

Some Savings from Cutting Unneeded Weapons Could Fund More Critical Needs

Some of the savings generated by cutting unneeded weapons could be used to fund research, development, and procurement in areas that the

services usually neglect: special forces, long-range bombers, unmanned aerial vehicles, defenses against cruise missiles, technology to detect and neutralize sea mines, and equipment to protect against attacks with biological and chemical weapons (Table 49.1). The war in Afghanistan showed that long-range bombers were devastating when guided to their targets by information from unmanned aerial vehicles and special forces on the ground. Much has been invested in defending U.S. forces against ballistic missiles; less effort has been put into defending troops against attacks from cheaper and more effective cruise missiles. More and more terrorists and countries are working on weapons of mass destruction, so more should be invested in defending U.S. forces and civilians at home from biological

Table 49.1
Weapon Systems to Terminate or Cut and Missions and Weapons That Need Increased Funding

Weapon or Mission	Function	Service
<i>Weapon Systems to Terminate or Cut</i>		
F-22	Air superiority fighter	Air Force
F/A-18E/F	Carrier-based fighter attack aircraft	Navy
Virginia-class submarine	Attack submarine	Navy
V-22	Tiltrotor transport aircraft	Marine Corps
Comanche	Reconnaissance attack helicopter	Army
<i>Neglected Missions and Weapons in Need of Increased Funding</i>		
Unmanned aerial vehicles	Reconnaissance, strike, etc.	All
Heavy bomber (R&D)	High-capacity, long-range bomb delivery	Air Force
Special forces	Intelligence gathering, commando attacks, designation of targets	Army, Navy, Air Force
Cruise missile defenses	Defend U.S. forces against cruise missiles	Army, Marine Corps
Mine countermeasures	Detect and neutralize sea mines	Navy, Marine Corps
Chemical and biological defense	Defend forces and civilian population	All

and chemical weapons. The Navy has neglected capabilities that can detect and neutralize sea mines, which can be devastating to naval operations. Because great advancements can be achieved for small amounts of funding in most of those areas, the remainder of the savings from cuts could be returned to the taxpayer.

Suggested Readings

Center for Defense Information. *Weekly Defense Monitor*. Various issues.

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—*Prepared by Ivan Eland*

