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# Throwing more money at the military won't make it stronger

See what President Trump has been doing since taking office



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The beginning of his term has featured controversial executive orders and frequent conflicts with the media.



By [Fareed Zakaria](#) Opinion writer March 2 at 8:48 PM

The first time I met Gen. David Petraeus, he said something that surprised me. It was the early days of the Iraq War and, although things were not going well, he had directed his region in the north skillfully and effectively. I asked him whether he wished he had more troops. Petraeus was too politically savvy to criticize the Donald Rumsfeld “light footprint” strategy, so he deflected the question, answering it a different way. “I wish we had more Foreign Service officers, aid professionals and other kinds of non-military specialists,” he said. The heart of the problem the United States was facing in Iraq, he noted presciently, was a deep sectarian divide between Shiite and Sunni, Arab and Kurd. “We need help on those issues. Otherwise, we’re relying on 22-year-old sergeants

to handle them. Now, they are great kids, but they really don't know the history, the language, the politics."

I thought of that exchange when reading reports that President Trump is proposing a [\\$54 billion increase](#) for the Defense Department, which would be offset by large cuts in the State Department, foreign aid and other civilian agencies. [Trump says](#) he wants to do this so that "nobody will dare question our military might again." But no one does. The U.S. military remains in a league of its own. The [U.S. defense budget in 2015](#) was nine times the size of Russia's and three times that of China's.

None of the difficulties the United States has faced over the past 25 years has been in any way because its military was too small or weak. As then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates noted in a [2007 lecture](#), "One of the most important lessons of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that military success is not sufficient to win." To achieve "long-term success," he explained, requires "economic development, institution-building . . . [and] good governance." Therefore, he called for "a dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security," including "diplomacy" and "foreign assistance."

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Consider the strategy that brought Iran to the negotiating table in 2013. It required intense diplomatic work to get Russia and China to agree to U.N. measures and to isolate Iran from neighbors such as Turkey. It took clever and tough sanctions devised by the Treasury Department that leveraged U.S. financial power. This is how power works in the modern world.

"We must do a lot more with less," [Trump said recently](#), adding that government needs to reform its ways. But the obvious target for this effort should be the Pentagon, which is the poster child for waste in government. The Pentagon is now the world's [largest bureaucracy](#), running a cradle-to-grave quasi-socialist system of employment, housing, health care and pensions for its [3 million employees](#). A recent report from its Defense Business Board concluded that it could easily save \$125 billion over five years by removing operational inefficiencies. (Senior officials quickly [buried the report](#) .) Those savings would [fund the entire State Department](#) plus all foreign aid programs for two and a half years. [Gates used to quip](#), "We have more people in military bands than we have Foreign Service officers." The total numbers are worth noting. There are only [13,000 employees](#) in the whole Foreign Service, compared with [742,000 civilians](#) in the Defense Department.

Trump railed in his address to Congress, as he has in the past, about the [\\$6 trillion](#) that the United States has spent in the Middle East. That figure is [exaggerated](#), but he's right that when the Pentagon goes to war, costs go through the stratosphere. In just one example, ProPublica tallied up the audits of the special inspector general for Afghanistan and found that the military had wasted at least [\\$17 billion](#) on a variety of projects.

Rosa Brooks, who served as a civilian adviser at the Pentagon under President Barack Obama, has written a fascinating book, "[How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything](#)," that describes how U.S. policy has been contorted by a military that keeps expanding while all other agencies wither. One of the blurbs on the back of the book says, "One of the most thought-provoking books I've ever read. It's as if we have been sleepwalking into this new world and Rosa has turned on a flashlight." The commendation comes from Jim Mattis, now the secretary of defense. Perhaps he should give the book to his boss.

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