The two major political parties are on record firmly supporting increases in military spending and it is important to understand the convoluted politics that underlie this support. The most salient political facts are that advocating increased military spending is an integral part of conservative ideology, and opposition to such spending increases is a perceived vulnerability of moderates and liberals. The conservative impulse to expand the military budget was constrained in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War when the Pentagon itself agreed that cutbacks were in order. But this widespread feeling subsided in a few years.

For a while, President Clinton held off demands from the Republican controlled Congress for military spending increases. Bending to the pressure, Clinton announced in the mid 1990s that it was time to reverse the downward trend, although he did not begin to propose real increases in spending until the late 1990s. As the 2000 elections neared, the rise in military spending began gaining momentum. In his campaign for the presidency, George Bush argued that the military was in decline and that he would build it up. By this time the Democrats had taken steps they hoped would neutralize the issue. Secretary William Cohen asserted in direct response to Bush that “We have begun the largest sustained increase in our military spending in a generation.” And Al Gore promised to spend much more on defense if he was elected than would Bush.

The first question that needs to be addressed is why do the two major parties advocate a military buildup in an era of diminished threats and when the United States is already spending about the average amount spent during the Cold War? Part of the answer has been alluded to. Support for expanding the military budget is a tried and true way for the conservatives who control the Republican Party to put the moderates and liberals who control the Democratic Party on the defensive in the jockeying that takes place in Congress and on the campaign trail during national elections. Most Republicans believe that they benefit politically from this posture because they assume the public supports increases in military spending and will reward them at the election booths. Most Democrats support increases because they are always nervous about the defense issue. They know that much of the spending is wasteful and unnecessary, but they are reluctant to vote against when the appropriations bill is brought up as they, too, assume the public approves of spending increases except in exceptional circumstances, such as the end of a war. The Democrats fear the electorate will punish them if they do not support spending increases.

What the Opinion Polls Say
Both groups are heavily influenced by their assumptions about public opinion, but what does the public really think about military spending? The belief that the public generally supports military spending increases, and specifically the current buildup, and that voters would lose confidence in and might vote against any elected official who is opposed, is not supported by public opinion polling data. For one thing, military spending is usually not a high priority among the general public, contrary to the accepted wisdom of politicians. A Washington Post/ABC poll conducted in September 2000 demonstrates the relatively low level of interest in military spending. The survey found that defense was ranked below the top 10 issues that most concerned registered voters. The higher priority issues were education, the economy, social security, health care, moral standards, the federal budget, crime, helping the middle class, and prescription drugs, in that order. The Mellman Group commissioned by the Council for a Livable World in the spring of this year found similar results in a poll. Of course, there are people who feel otherwise. They are a small minority. The polls show that only three percent to four percent of those surveyed rank military spending as a top priority.

More importantly, what the politicians assume the voters think about military spending differs from what the
voters are actually saying to the pollsters. However, the way the voters respond to questions about military spending depends upon the specific questions that are asked and the information given to the persons polled. This point helps explain the varying results and apparent contradictions that show up in different polls. If the question is simply whether people favor a strong military program and are comfortable with the present level of spending, most people answer affirmatively. On the other hand, if the question is whether the U.S. military is strong enough to ensure national defense and protect our interests around the world, as was asked in an April 1999, NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, most people respond that the United States is strong enough.

The Center for the Study of Policy Attitudes of the University of Maryland has been analyzing polling data on military questions since the early 1990s. The Center’s results reinforce the conclusion that if questions about military spending are placed in an appropriate context most people see no reason to increase military spending and would prefer that it be reduced. For example, if people are asked to specify the level of military spending they would prefer, the majority say they would like substantially less to be spent. If they are asked whether they would prefer increases or reductions in military spending, most favor reductions. When people were informed by the polling group about the portion of the federal budget’s discretionary dollars spent for defense, compared with the amount spent on other discretionary programs, most people say they favor a substantial reduction in the share going to the military. If given the choice of cutting military spending in order to balance the budget, most people support cuts. When people are informed about U.S. military spending relative to military spending of our potential enemies, the majority conclude that U.S. spending is excessive.

When the preface to the question states that monies from cuts in defense will be redirected to domestic programs, a large majority favors reductions in military spending. According to the Center, in one poll 75 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that the military budget is inflated by members of Congress promoting jobs in their districts, duplication of activities by the military services, and the influence of campaign contributions from defense contractors.

**National Missile Defense**

A similar situation exists in the area of nuclear missile defense. The accepted wisdom in Washington is that the public strongly supports the national missile defense program. The polling data shows, once again, that the way people answer questions about the program depends on the way the questions are asked and the facts possessed by the respondents. If the question is whether the United States should try to develop missile defenses or not try because the effort might interfere with existing treaties with Russia, most people would go forward with the program.

A different kind of inquiry was made this past July by a Harris poll. It asked whether those polled had seen or read anything about the missile defense system that the Pentagon had been testing. A majority of respondents said they had seen or read something about the system and most (64 percent) people in that group knew the test was unsuccessful. The question then asked was whether President Clinton and Congress should (a) continue with more research until a system is successfully tested before deciding whether to go forward with the full system, or (b) commit now to the full system. Two-thirds of them chose to continue research until the missile defense program proves successful in tests. Only about one-fifth said the government should commit to the full system now. These finding are similar to those of the Mellman Group poll mentioned above. In that poll, the majority said the decision about building a national missile defense should await completion of all scheduled tests.

There are several important lessons in this. One concerns the interpretation of the polls. Explanations of public opinion about military issues provided by government officials and reported by the media are frequently
misleading. There is a tendency to exaggerate the public’s support of military spending increases and of expensive new weapons. Because assumptions about what the public believes plays an important role in policy decisions about the military budget, closer attention needs to be paid to polling data and their meaning.

Another lesson is that the more the public is informed about military spending and related issues, the more reasoned and based on facts is public opinion. Both the polls on military spending and on missile defense demonstrate the truism that information is necessary for opinions to be informed. When pollsters include related information with questions, respondents give reasoned replies on spending levels and on plans for complex new weapons. But the information about military issues provided to the public is often fragmentary and out of control.

Groups such as ECAAR have a special responsibility to illuminate through economic analysis the choices for military spending. Economic analysis of the military budget and military programs, and the effects of spending trends on the economy, among other topics, can contribute greatly to public understanding and to policy making. In fact, it is not possible for the public to make rational choices without an appreciation of military economics. One needs to ask whether enough is being done in these areas and whether it is possible to do more.

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