



What Would the Founders Say About Trump's \$686 Billion Pentagon Budget?

“War is in fact the true nurse of executive aggrandizement. In war a physical force is to be created, and it is the executive will which is to direct it. In war the public treasures are to be unlocked, and it is the executive hand which is to dispense them. In war the honors and emoluments of office are to be multiplied; and it is the executive patronage under which they are to be enjoyed.”



— James Madison, Helvidius

IV (1793)

President Donald Trump recently published his budget requests for Fiscal Year 2019, which includes \$686 billion for the Department of Defense.

Pumping more cash into the Pentagon has always been a priority for President Trump, but the massive military outlays he proposes for 2019 are so expansive that even Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis calls the plan the “real growth” that he and the the president have always wanted.

The 2019 Pentagon budget is about 12 percent higher than the current level, and the overall federal budget deficit will come in at about \$1 trillion. As a result, the president’s budget proposal guarantees that the budget will not be balanced over 10 years, as he promised during his campaign for the White House.

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Of course, the purpose of having a military is to defend the country. But as was the case with his predecessors in the White House, the president has proposed a budget that goes beyond that. Among the purchases proposed by the president, there is about half a billion to continue pushing for “regime change” in Syria; about \$10 billion “to establish U.S. preeminence to, around, and on the Moon;” and more than \$6.3 billion for the Pentagon’s European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), a program designed to protect us from the Russians (yes, that sounds like something from the 1985 Department of Defense budget).

In the copy of the budget provided on the White House’s website, the overall goals for the military budget are set out:

“The Budget requests the resources DOD [Department of Defense] needs to defend the homeland, remain the predominant military power in the world, maintain a world order that reflects America’s values, support America’s allies and partners, promote America’s prosperity, and advance America’s security interests.”

Setting aside the fact that there is absolutely not a single syllable of the Constitution that provides for the use of taxpayer funds to support our “allies and partners,” the notion that there should be such a massive military complex is, itself, antithetical to republican values and to the intent and wisdom of the



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Founders.

During the Virginia ratifying convention, James Madison described a standing army as the “greatest mischief that can happen.” His colleague and fellow delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, George Mason put a finer point on it:

No man has a greater regard for the military gentlemen than I have. I admire their intrepidity, perseverance, and valor. But when once a standing army is established in any country, the people lose their liberty. When, against a regular and disciplined army, yeomanry are the only defence [sic], — yeomanry, unskilful and unarmed, — what chance is there for preserving freedom? Give me leave to recur to the page of history, to warn you of your present danger. Recollect the history of most nations of the world. What havoc, desolation, and destruction, have been perpetrated by standing armies!

In *The Federalist*, No. 29, Alexander Hamilton echoes not only Mason’s warning against a standing army, but his solution to the threat, as well:

If circumstances should at any time oblige the government to form an army of any magnitude that army can never be formidable to the liberties of the people while there is a large body of citizens, little, if at all, inferior to them in discipline and the use of arms, who stand ready to defend their own rights and those of their fellow-citizens. This appears to me the only substitute that can be devised for a standing army, and the best possible security against it, if it should exist.

In his *View of the Constitution of the United States*, founding era jurist St. George Tucker speaks as if he foresaw our day and the fatal combination of an increasingly powerful military force and the disarmament of civilians.

“Wherever standing armies are kept up, and the right of the people to keep and bear arms is, under any colour or pretext whatsoever, prohibited, liberty, if not already annihilated, is on the brink of destruction,” Tucker warns.

In *The Federalist* No. 46, James Madison insisted that the people of the United States would never “pursue some fixed plan for the extension of the military establishment” unless they were afflicted with a “degree of madness” that would cause them to suffer from “incoherent dreams of a delirious jealousy, or the misjudged exaggerations of a counterfeit zeal, than like the sober apprehensions of genuine patriotism.”

Thomas Gordon, one of the 10 men most often quoted by the Founding Generation, warned that the maintenance of a standing army has been proven over thousands of years of human history to be “inconsistent with liberty.”

His *Cato’s Letters* collaborator, John Trenchard, parroted his partner, warning, “I will venture to say, that if this army does not make us slaves, we are the only people upon Earth in such circumstances that ever escaped it....”

No one believes that President Trump intends to enslave the American people using the U.S. military. That’s not the issue. The problem is one of constitutional fidelity and historical record.

Trenchard, again, revealed the underlying threat to freedom posed by the mere existence of a large standing army, even when the elected leaders of the country can be counted on not to use the armed forces against his fellow citizens:

“It is a most miserable thing to have no other security for our liberty, than the will of a man, though the



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most just man living: For that is not a free government where there is a good prince (for even the most arbitrary governments have had sometimes a relaxation of their miseries) but where it is so constituted, that no one can be a tyrant if he would.”

There’s no debate over whether the majority of Americans support the president’s proposed increase in the size and scope of the U.S. military establishment. We have been trained to believe, as the president writes in his budget document:

The Budget requests resources needed to compete with great powers and others, deter conflict, and win the Nation’s wars. The Budget builds a more lethal, ready, and larger joint force that, combined with a robust system of allies and partners, would sustain American influence and preserve stable regional balances of power that have proven conducive to peace and prosperity.

The debate should be, however, whether we should be involved in so many “wars,” whether we should be supplying military materiel to our “allies and partners,” whether we should seek to be the “predominant military power in the world,” and whether we should use our armed forces to create “a world order that reflects America’s values.” The reality is that, if America were to return to its traditional foreign policy of minding its own business and staying clear of foreign entanglements, America would be safer and the budget actually needed to defend America would be a lot smaller.

On this observation of George Washington’s birthday, perhaps these issues should be analyzed through the lens of our first president’s famous “Farewell Address” found [here](#).

To get you started, I’ll leave you with one salient sentence from that inspiring proclamation:

What is of inestimable value, they must derive from union an exemption from those broils and wars between themselves, which so frequently afflict neighboring countries not tied together by the same governments, which their own rival ships alone would be sufficient to produce, but which opposite foreign alliances, attachments, and intrigues would stimulate and embitter. Hence, likewise, they will avoid the necessity of those overgrown military establishments which, under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to republican liberty.



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