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Defense R&D Priorities

As the swollen and deficit-crippled federal budget for 1985 faces partisan wrangling in the glare of election-year politics, the bargaining process bears watching. With proposed budget authority for the Department of Defense at an all-time high under the Reagan dispensation, consensus politics will certainly lead to a significant cutback while a margin of real growth from the current year will be maintained.

The research and development component of the defense budget presents an inviting target. After all, a 27 percent increase (in current dollars, to be sure) on top of a comparable jump of 18 percent the year before, tends to concentrate attention. It is politically convenient to make a cut where it is least vexing to those who measure the adequacy of defense forces by counting slots and equipments and who put a higher value on near-term readiness than on investments in quality. Research and development equate, in this view, with discretionary spending and far-out fantasies.

What is missed in bundling the "R" together with the "D" in the Defense numbers is the striking dominance of support for development and the modesty of the allocations to research. The research (or 6.1) category, for example, is budgeted for a shaky 2 percent real growth, while the provision for exploratory development calls for a mere 1 percent. Taken together, these two categories of investment represent what is termed "technology base" effort, yet they draw slim rations in an otherwise aggressive budget for research and development. It is a curious outcome in resource allocation.

What would seem to be happening is that within the Department of Defense the respective services are allowed broad discretion in funneling expanding requirements into stipulated budget ceilings, and the claiming race puts hard requirements ahead of discretionary research. Yet, the rush to proceed with development while shortchanging the technology base reflects a trade-off decision that is fundamentally flawed. Nor can it be compensated for by specialized "star wars" research or by the generous buildup of basic research support in the budget of the National Science Foundation. Every annual budget is spattered with contradictions, to be sure, but one would not expect an administration so compulsively oriented toward enhancement of the national security to fail to protect investment in the technology base as the source of downstream assets.

More troubling is the probable fate of the trivial increment for the technology base in the 1985 budget. As Congress lunges at formulas for shaving deficits, the probability is that the defense budget will be handed a percentage cut. As this cut is applied throughout the national defense function, research and development will absorb their share. But given the dynamics of the process, the development shopping list is likely to be sheltered at the expense of the technology base, and, in the absence of intervention from the top, the outcome will be depleted investment in the technology base, a result that can only be termed imprudent and counterproductive.

As with everything else in the federal budget, the size and the mix of the defense budget is a political question. The growth of that budget and its constraining impact on other demands on insufficient resources invites controversy. Like most controversies, this one will be resolved by compromise. The execution of the settlement also matters, however, and it is at this stage of political action that the ox is gored. The coalitions that will spring to the rescue of military procurement and operational needs are unlikely to forgo short-term enhancements in order to spare investments in long-range and high-risk technology-base research, modest as the level of investment may be. Under the circumstances, it is high time to bring the Defense Science Board into the budget process.—WILLIAM D. CAREY