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ARTICLE

The role of the media in boosting military spending

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ABSTRACT

Military spending in the USA and the UK is far in excess of defensive needs. The rationale for such spending now has little to do with defence, and is based on the capacity to intervene unilaterally and globally. This rationale, while favoured by political and military elites, has no clear popular mandate. It is here that the media play a role: not in simple-minded boosterism, but in creating a climate in which it is difficult to countenance cutting military budgets. There are four main elements of this unwitting complicity: the news media tend to focus on shortfalls rather excesses in the military budget; they tend to provide few comparative figures that might communicate the size of military budgets; they allow support for the troops to spill over into assumptions about support for military spending; and they allow the establishment of spurious links between the terrorist threat and defence spending.

KEY WORDS • media • military spending • public opinion

I have a fridge magnet depicting a mock newspaper headline which reads: 'US Slashes Defense Spending – Says Education More Important'. The joke is that such a thing is both highly plausible yet almost unimaginable, funny but not funny at all – a stark contrast between popular desire and a grim *realpolitic*. The purpose of this article is to try and unravel some of the contradictions therein.

The assumption, of course, is that a major cut in US military spending is politically unthinkable. If this is true, it is *not* because public opinion makes it so. A 2005 survey by the Program for International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland gave people the existing US federal budget and asked them to say which areas they would cut and which they would increase.[1] I have carried out a similar exercise with my students in both the USA and the UK for many years, and the results are invariably the same. Most people cut the military budget, often by breathtaking margins, and increase

public spending on more benign areas – like education. In the PIPA survey, the average reduction in US military spending was 31 per cent (while specific spending on Iraq/Afghanistan was cut by 35%). The gargantuan proportions of the Pentagon budget means that this amounts (on the basis of figures used by PIPA) to an annual saving of $163 billion.

If this contradicts conventional wisdom about American attitudes, it should not surprise those familiar with the range of opinion data on public spending priorities. These data suggest that education, healthcare and the environment are perennially popular areas of public spending, while military spending is not. For the last few decades, polls have shown that large majorities repeatedly support increasing spending on education and health. Even during periods when support for military spending has been at its highest (notably during 1979 to 1981, following the 'bear in the woods' Cold War campaign by Ronald Reagan, and after the terrorist attacks in 2001), the military budget rarely reached the levels of support routinely enjoyed by forms of social spending. On the contrary, those favouring cuts in military spending often outnumber those favouring increases – something almost unheard of for areas like education and health (see Page and Shapiro, 1992; Lewis, 2001; Entman, 2003).

The PIPA studies also suggest that the US public is far less hawkish and far more multilateralist than is often supposed, generally favouring diplomacy and internationalism over unilateral military intervention.[2] So why does the idea that we might redirect our resources away from military spending towards other priorities – whether it is global poverty reduction, disease prevention, or tackling climate change – seem so utopian? Part of the answer is that hegemony is often less to do with influencing public opinion than the conventional wisdom *about* public opinion (Lewis, 2001), and the conventional wisdom often assumes that military spending *is* politically popular (Entman, 2003: 132–3).

It is also true that, as President Eisenhower predicted, the US military–industrial complex has become a colossus of such dimension and reach that it is easier to feed it than to challenge it (Hellinger and Judd, 1991). Widespread elite support for military spending is based on an interlocking set of powerful vested interests, as well as by cruder imperial ambitions like 'full spectrum dominance' (Mahajan, 2003) – notions that become official policy without serious open discussion and with little public support.

But military spending is so far in excess of defensive needs that the question of shifting resources elsewhere remains. Elite support for high military spending is only possible in the face of some form of public quiescence. And

it is here that the media play a role: not in simple-minded boosterism, but in creating a climate in which it is difficult to countenance cutting military budgets.

The scale of military spending

The most authoritative assessments of global military spending tend to point to the same overall trends. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the world's governments committed over $1.2 trillion on military spending in 2006 (at current prices).[3] This represents a 37 per cent increase in real terms over the 10-year period since 1997.

As we might expect, military spending dropped after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, but it has since climbed back up to Cold War levels, despite the absence of any global superpower to rival the USA. The USA is the principal determinant of the upward trend, and its military expenditure now accounts for almost half of the world total (46% according to SIPRI, 47% according to the US-based Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, whose figures come from the International Institute for Strategic Studies and the US Department of Defense).[4]

The continued growth of US military power is in the context of a global picture dominated by staunch US allies (the NATO countries, Japan, South Korea and Australia) who are, between them, responsible for 70 per cent of global sending. The USA alone outspends the remaining 'Axis of Evil' countries combined – Iran and North Korea – by a ratio of 72 to 1. Only a tiny proportion of this is spent on peacekeeping operations.

In market exchange rate terms (see Table 1) the second highest global spender is the UK, although in terms of purchasing power parity, SIPRI's data suggest that China is second and the UK fifth (the Center for Arms Control has China second and the UK fourth). Either way, the UK is the biggest military spender in the EU. While US and UK spending has been boosted by military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, these trends were firmly in place before 2003.

While there has been great debate about *specific* military engagements – especially in Iraq – there has been little public discussion about overall levels of spending. During the Cold War, military power was seen (rightly or wrongly) as defensive – a deterrent against aggression by the Soviet Union and its allies. While there was debate about who was responsible for the Cold War arms race, as well as the motives behind it, the defensive rationale was well understood. The collapse of a rival superpower in 1989 meant the cost

Table 1 Top five military spenders in 2006 in market exchange rate terms

Rank	Country	Spending	Spend per capita	World share (%)	Population share (%)
1	USA	$528.7	$1756	46	5
2	UK	$59.2	$990	5	1
3	France	$53.1	$875	5	1
4	China	$49.5	$37	4	20
5	Japan	$43.7	$341	4	2

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

of defence against the risk of invasion was dramatically reduced. In countries like the UK and the USA, spending levels are now far in excess of any plausible *defensive* needs, and are no longer justified on such grounds.

The titles of the Ministry of Defence in the UK and the Department of Defense in the USA have thereby become Orwellian misnomers: military spending now has little to do with defending oneself against attack, and is calculated on the basis of the capacity to *intervene* in global conflicts or against regimes. Given the huge public resources involved, the fact that this shift in rationale has occurred with so little public debate is both extraordinary and alarming. This lack of consultation or democratic input suits those who favour maintaining military power on a Cold War scale, and works against those who might wish to see different priorities for public spending. After all, a traditional defensive rationale is a far more popular proposition than a modern interventionist one.

Why military spending is not a matter of debate

The links between media corporations and the military industrial complex have sometimes been brought into sharp focus by moments of unashamed conglomeration (notably by GE's ownership of NBC and Westinghouse's ownership of CBS – see, for example, Lee and Solomon, 1990). But the media's principal influence in maintaining high military spending – in both the USA and the UK – is both inadvertent and indirect. It is less a matter of promoting support, more of diminishing opposition and sidelining the question of why we spend so much on military power when there are so many other pressing public spending needs (such as health, education, environmental protection/climate change, transport and global poverty). There is no conspiracy here, just a series of news conventions, journalistic assumptions and practices.

There are four main elements of this unwitting complicity: the news media tend to focus on *shortfalls* rather than *excesses* in the military budget;

they tend to provide few *comparative figures* that might communicate the size of military budgets; they allow support for the troops to spill over into assumptions about support for military spending, and they allow the establishment of spurious links between the terrorist threat and defence spending.

Focus on shortfall rather than excesses

As Jenny Kitzinger has argued, news coverage often conforms to established templates, in which a familiar storyline emerges with an accompanying set of journalistic conventions (Kitzinger, 2000). These templates provide a referential system for journalists to quickly recognize 'what the story is' and how to tell it. This takes us beyond the literature on news values (e.g. Galtung and Ruge, 1999; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001), which, while useful, tends to ignore the more discursive elements of news value. If the 'tick box' language of news values establishes structural hierarchies (e.g. violence + elite concern = newsworthiness), media templates have a more arbitrary quality. Events become more newsworthy because they fit a certain storyline rather than because of their constituent elements.

If the mock headline about slashing defence spending is a self-conscious breach of a media template, it is, in part, because there is no established convention for telling stories about excesses in military spending (as in '*military spending out of control, says report*'). On the contrary, when military spending becomes newsworthy it tends to be because of claimed shortfalls: troops without the necessary equipment to do the job, a weakening of our defences or the armed forces being stretched to the limit are all familiar refrains. In this discursive context, the very notion that we might spend *less* on the military looks out of place, isolated outside a consensus informed by a well-rehearsed coterie of military sources.

Media templates solidify around a series of news practices: in this case, the tendency of defence correspondents to rely on military sources rather than, say, organizations like SIPRI or the Center for Arms Control. In this context, increases in military spending tend to pass without much notice or dissent. When President Clinton proposed significant increases in military spending towards the end of his tenure, for example, it was without great fanfare or debate. Indeed, only the more attentive followers of the news in the USA would have been aware that military spending *had* increased.

These templates can, of course, shift. So, for example, Haran et al. (2007) point out how the British coverage of stem cell research has shifted from a negative story about scientists stretching the boundaries of medical ethics towards a more positive story about medical breakthroughs. Such changes tend

to require a great deal of discursive work (in the stem cell case, by scientific organizations and the UK government). And yet it is not inconceivable for the question 'just why do we spend so much on defence?' to be added to the journalistic repertoire.

Lack of comparative data on spending levels

In 2004, we monitored the coverage of the UK Defence Review on British 24-hour news channels (Lewis et al., 2005). The coverage was informed by military or pro-military sources bemoaning various cutbacks. So, for example, ITV reported that 'not since the 18th century has Britain had a smaller navy than France – it will soon though'. While this statement was in keeping with the tone of the coverage, it was also a rare instance of comparative figures being used to inform a story about military spending. Needless to say, this highly selective use of figures – neglecting to mention that UK military spending is the highest in the EU – fitted snugly into the 'shortfalls' template.

The failure to use comparative data, or to put a story in its wider context, is very much a feature of broadcast news reporting. The same study found that only a tiny percentage of stories on *any* subject referred to a wider context, and less than 2 per cent used any kind of comparative data or information. The problem with this omission is that it is very difficult to appreciate the size of public expenditure *without* comparative data: for most of us, the language of millions and billions is difficult to comprehend without some basis for comparison.

The consequence of this – combined with the 'shortfalls' template – is that many people, especially in the USA, tend to significantly underestimate levels of military spending (Lewis, 2001; Entman, 2003). This brings the polling data into sharper focus: even the lukewarm support for military spending is based on the assumption that spending is significantly lower than it actually is. There are outcries against many apparent instances of excessive or unnecessary spending, but the military is rarely the subject of such media scrutiny. Such an omission is far from being ideologically innocent, and partly explains the public quiescence on the issue.

Supporting the troops

One of the motivations behind the large-scale provision for embedded journalists during the early combat phase of the Iraq War in 2003 was the Pentagon's understanding that regardless of people's view of the campaign, there were high levels of public sympathy for the troops themselves. As one of the architects of the Pentagon's PR effort put it:

> Once somebody decides to start a war and you start shooting, from the uniform perspective we need the support of the American people for our troops ... and what better way for people to understand that than to put the face of the troops as the face of the war ... while you may or may not agree with the war, you really support them and them coming back alive. (Admiral T. McCreary, cited in Lewis et al., 2006: 51)

Our research on the media coverage of the main combat phase of the 2003 Iraq War (Lewis et al., 2006) suggests that the focus on troops in combat was promoted by the widespread use of embedded reporters. This, in turn, meant little discussion about the wider issues involved (see Tumber and Palmer, 2004), which was a key element in garnering public support (Lewis, 2004). In the UK, public support for the war was highest during this period, but by the end of the summer of 2003 – when the focus had shifted *towards* wider questions (not least about the absence of weapons of mass destruction) – support dropped markedly.

In September, 2003, we asked people to tell us about their attitude towards the Iraq War at various times. Despite people's tendency to want to appear consistent, we found majority opposition before and afterwards, but clear majority support during the war. We then asked people *why* they had changed their minds: by far the most common response (61% of those who supported the war during the main combat phase but subsequently opposed it) was that they were generally sceptical about the war, but felt the need to be supportive of the troops during it (Lewis et al., 2006: 160–4). In other words, the surge in support for the Iraq War had little to do with people being persuaded of the case for intervention.

Despite subsequent scandals about the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners, the 'support the troops' discourse remains a powerful political weapon – one which the embedded reporters programme successfully exploited. But its relationship to support for high military spending is tenuous, based as it is on a series of suppositions: *if* you are going to intervene in global conflicts or to overthrow regimes, and *if* this requires the mobilization of large numbers of troops, then they should be well paid and well treated. The rhetorical trick, for those who invoke the welfare of soldiers to push for more resources, is to turn these suppositions into assumptions. For journalists keen to avoid being seen as *not* supporting the troops, this rhetoric may be cynical but it is both intimidating and difficult to disentangle.

War on terror

In *Constructing Public Opinion* (Lewis, 2001), I argued that those in favour of maintaining high levels of military spending survived the post-Cold War

years of the 1990s by developing a new discursive framework, which I rather clumsily described as the 'dangerous world syndrome', a world in which sinister dark forces – like Saddam Hussein – might emerge from the shadows. This was perhaps best expressed by George W. Bush at the beginning of the new millennium: 'When I was coming up,' he declared, 'it was a dangerous world, and you knew exactly who they were. It was us vs. them, and it was clear who them was. Today, we are not so sure who they are, but we know they're there.'[5]

Although Bush was ridiculed in some quarters for the feebleness of this rationale, the terrorist attacks some 18 months later made this statement seem almost prophetic. And there is no doubt that the war on terror has become the new anti-communism (Entman, 2003), the evil empire becoming the axis of evil – a global threat requiring constant vigilance.

The idea that September 11th, 2001, marked the dawn of a new era was set in place so quickly that it became almost impossible to question it. And yet the US State Department's own data suggested that what happened on September 11th was a one-off rather than the beginning of something new. Their annual report, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, clearly indicated that the number of acts of global terrorism has been declining since the mid-1980s, with fewer incidents in 2002 and 2003 than in any of the previous 20 years. And despite the scale of casualties involved on September 11th, their data suggested that more people died in 1998 at the hands of terrorists than in 2001.[6] There may indeed have been an upsurge in terrorist activity *since* the Iraq War – as many predicted there would be – although the US State Department stopped publishing *Patterns of Global Terrorism* in 2004, there is no authoritative comparative data for recent years. Any increase from 2004, however, suggests a quite different narrative, one in which terrorist activity *increases* in response to aggressive military action.

Moreover, whatever the rhetorical similarities between the Cold War and the war on terror, terrorism – almost by definition – bypasses rather than confronts conventional military defences. History suggests that terrorism is more likely to be prevented by political engagement (as it was with the ANC, the PLO and the IRA), while force tends to strengthen the ideological convictions that inspire it. Nonetheless, the dominant narrative about the terrorist threat remains a history that began on September 11th, 2001, while the political use of the war on terror to justify high levels of military spending is rarely interrogated.

So, for example, when the BBC reported that: 'US President George W. Bush has announced plans for a $48bn increase in defence spending to fight the war on terror',[7] the idea that military power is the best means of combating

terrorism slipped into the public consciousness, reinforced by hundreds of soundbites from political leaders, and is only rarely challenged.

Debating military spending

These various media discourses and conventions combine to make high levels of military spending politically acceptable. And yet, in spite of a lop-sided rhetorical climate, public support remains tepid at best. This matters, not least because the resources involved are so large. In a paper for the World Bank, Devarajan, Miller and Swanson calculate that the cost of reaching Millennium Development Goals by 2015 is an extra $40–$60 billion a year (Devarajan et al., 2004). This includes the elimination of starvation and malnutrition globally, providing universal education, universal access to water and reversing the spread of AIDS and malaria.

While the sums involved are considerable, they come to less than half the sum that might be saved by a cut in US military spending recommended by US citizens in the PIPA survey. Such a cut would still leave the US military as the most powerful on earth many times over. And yet the prospect of such a diversion of resources is not on the political agenda.

This is, in part, because of an informational climate that diminishes the chances of debating the issue. And despite the BBC's 2007 impartiality report which took the corporation to task for its sympathetic coverage of anti-poverty campaigns,[8] in more subtle ways the news media's coverage of this issue favours a hawkish status quo. Impartiality, in this sense, would be to allow a robust debate about military spending, based on a serious assessment of the sums involved, the nature of the threats and the purpose of current military strategy.

Notes

1 See http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brunitedstatescanadara/85.php?nid=&id=&pnt=85&lb=btot (July 2007).
2 See http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Pres_Election_04/html/new_9_29_04.html (July 2007).
3 See http://www.sipri.org (July 2007).
4 http://www.armscontrolcenter.org (July 2007).
5 Speech at Iowa Western Community College (21 January 2000).
6 US Department of State (January 2004) Patterns of global terrorism 2003, http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2003/33771.htm
7 See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1778681.stm
8 www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/research/impartiality.html

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