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Rethinking the Pentagon's role

An unpopular war and a series of ugly events and disturbing policies are giving the U.S. military a bad name. Critics tie them all up: from the barbarities of My-lai and the case of the Green Berets to the large sums secretly spent to secure the military support of our Thai and Filipino allies; or the $4.3 billion sunk into that spectacular aerodynamic mishmash, the F-111; not to forget the inadvertent nerve-gassing of 6,000 sheep. The notion spreads that Doctor Strangelove is alive and well at the Pentagon, and surrounded by eager acolytes.

Despite the noisy and emotional Dismantle-the-Pentagon school of criticism, a strong military establishment remains essential to national security, and indeed to the eventual achievement of high-minded social goals. Even after the war in Vietnam comes to an end, a sizable, effective and expensive military force will be necessary. It is proper to ask how big it should be, and what its role should be. The valid criticism is not that U.S. military strength is unnecessary or immoral, but that too frequently it has been haphazardly conceived, wastefully acquired and inadequately controlled.

For too long the Pentagon's impulse was to build anything it could dream of, on the grounds that the other side would do the same thing. In what it buys, and how much it pays, it tolerates unconscionably wasteful practices, its own and its suppliers'. It has on occasion misled Congress, the public and itself, overestimating what the Soviet bloc has and underestimating the amount it would cost to match them. Tightened departmental procedures, while important, are a lesser need than a strict supervisory job by Congress.

This year, Congress finally displayed unmistakable signs of interest in the job, mounting—with not much initial success—a well-publicized offensive against the $75.3 billion Defense Department budget. One lesson of the debate so far is that Congress cannot effectively supervise Pentagon spending until the Hill's armed services committees are given far greater staff resources and full access to Defense Department data. Another obstacle to congressional scrutiny is the attitude characterized by South Carolina's Mendel Rivers, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. For years the redoubtable Rivers has kept the Pentagon's congressional tap open with a combination of authoritarian powers over Defense floor debates and subcommittee investigations, primitivistic flag-waving ("America is too young to die"), and flagrant pork-barreling among congressmen who have or want defense work in their districts.

Even more fundamental to the staggering defense outlay of one trillion dollars since 1945 is the traditional U.S. doctrine of "erring on the side of strength." It took a military man, Dwight Eisenhower, to caution: "Because security is based upon moral and economic, as well as purely military strength, a point can be reached at which additional funds for arms, far from bolstering security, weaken it."

In a recent issue, FORTUNE projected that after Vietnam $17.6 billion, or 22%, of the U.S. defense budget could be trimmed without any weakening of our national security. Among the ways we have wasted billions are unneeded purchases to fill nonexistent manned bomber and nuclear missile "gaps"; spectacular cost overruns like the $1.5 billion for the C-5A transport plane; maintenance of obsolete defense bases overseas; military assistance and "training" agreements to protect unsavory regimes, often against drummed-up dangers.

Still, it would be foolish to argue that eliminating a few dubious programs, or introducing better cost-accounting methods (which Robert McNamara worked at), would dramatically lower the Pentagon's bill or define the military's proper place. Nothing less than a redefinition of strategic policy is required. False and obsolescent defense assumptions need to be challenged and retired, and well-reasoned parameters set for the uses—and limits—of U.S. military strength in the 1970s. Among the questions to be looked into are these:

- The slogan "No More Vietnams" has been on practically everyone's lips, but what exactly does that mean? President Nixon has made clear that the U.S. seeks to avoid new military involvements in Asia and Latin America. But more needs to be known about the old ones, many of them existing under secret agreements, before we can even debate the justice of former Assistant Defense Secretary Paul Warnke's charge that U.S. national security is too closely identified with "the viability of every international basket case with anti-Communist credentials."
- President Nixon has supported the Soviet-U.S. arms limitation talks in Helsinki, and made the gesture of renouncing most weapons of chemical and biological warfare. How extensive an agreement do we expect (and want) from our Russian partners-in-competitive-spending? Besides CBW, are there any other "unthinkable" weapons, nuclear or nonnuclear, that we would take the risk of no longer thinking about?
- Our European allies are no longer weak but strong economically, and the manned strategic bomber has largely given way to the intercontinental ballistic missile. Do we still need a NATO force in Europe of 300,000 U.S. troops costing $12 billion annually?

Only when such questions are faced will the U.S. be able to conceive of a defense establishment equal to its tasks, but not overwhelming in its demands. Such an establishment requires, in addition to money and weaponry, the service of men of character, ability and dedication. Their pride depends in turn on the country's pride in them. The massacre at Mylai has quite properly raised questions that merit national self-examination, but it would be tragic for our national life if the reproaches were so sweeping and indiscriminatory as to tarnish a necessary calling and honorable careers.