



FPI Bulletin: Armed Forces Need Trump to be Advocate-in-Chief

April 28, 2017

By FPI Policy Director David Adesnik

On his first day in office, President Trump [pledged](#) to rebuild the U.S. military. Last month, he submitted a [budget](#) that would begin to reverse damaging cuts to the defense budget. However, during critical last-minute negotiations to avoid a government shutdown, the president has fallen mostly silent on defense. As a result, he has jeopardized the first installment of funding necessary to begin the promised build-up. Only by becoming a fireless advocate for rebuilding the Armed Forces can Trump persuade Congress to invest sufficiently in restoring America's strength.

In February, President Trump [committed](#) his administration to a "historic increase in defense spending," promising the troops that they would always have the tools they needed to win. Since the Armed Forces' needs were so urgent, the White House [announced](#) in mid-March that it would seek an additional \$30 billion of defense spending for the current fiscal year rather than waiting for 2018. At the time, it was already clear that the White House would only have about six weeks to persuade Congress to appropriate the additional \$30 billion, since the government was operating under a [stopgap funding measure](#) that would expire at 12 A.M. on the morning of Saturday, April 29—a deadline now just 12 hours away.

Before pursuing a budget deal that would increase military spending and keep the government open for the rest of 2017, the White House chose to pursue its top domestic priority, the repeal of Obamacare, formally known as the Affordable Care Act. The failure of that effort illustrated the risks of insufficient personal engagement by the commander-in-chief. Without the president leading from the front, Republican majorities in both the House and Senate may not coalesce behind his agenda. This lesson applies just as strongly to defense spending as it does to healthcare.

While the clock ticked down in April, the president's public advocacy on behalf of defense spending actually decreased. The previous month, Trump [visited](#) the *USS Gerald R. Ford*, the Navy's newest aircraft carrier, to make the case for a buildup. The next day, the president dedicated his [weekly address](#) to the nation to the subject of defense. There has been no similar effort by Trump in April.

Furthermore, the president has barely raised the subject of defense with his 28 million followers on Twitter. When he has, his comments have misled in a manner that encourages complacency. Two weeks ago, Trump [tweeted](#), "Our military is building and is rapidly becoming stronger than ever before. Frankly, we have no choice!" Yet the military is not building and is not becoming stronger—rapidly or otherwise—since Trump has not yet secured any additional funding from Congress. In fact, as a result of the stopgap funding measure now in place, known as a continuing resolution, or CR, money and time are being wasted because a CR [locks in](#) program-by-program spending levels from the previous year, regardless of whether those levels remain appropriate.

Events this month have shown how U.S. national security depends on having military forces that are ready to fight at a moment's notice. First, a vicious chemical weapons attack led the president to launch [missile strikes](#) on the Syrian air force, notwithstanding his many promises to avoid deeper engagement in Syria. Next, Pyongyang's missile tests led to a sudden increase in tensions on the Korean Peninsula, with Trump [telling](#) Fox Business News, "We are sending an armada," while [warning](#) last night that a "major, major conflict" with North Korea remains possible. These incidents provided the president with a perfect opening to make the case for an additional \$30 billion for defense, yet he missed the opportunity.

Last week, Vice President Pence made his own visit to an aircraft carrier, the *USS Ronald Reagan*, where he called for a restoration of the Armed Forces like the one that Reagan achieved in his day. Like the president, however, Pence seemed to suggest that a restoration was already underway. "Just look at what President Trump has already accomplished," the vice president [said](#), "In his first 100 days, President Trump has taken decisive action to end the era of budget cuts for America's military." But there has been no decisive action. There have been proposals and promises, but these only have value if Trump and Pence ensure that Congress makes them a reality.

Undoubtedly, Congress knows that the president wants to rebuild the military. But they also know that he wants to build a wall on the Mexican border, cut taxes, and do many other things. What Congress doesn't know is which of these things the president would postpone or sacrifice if he cannot achieve them all at once. That is why it is so important for him to send a clear and consistent signal to Congress about the importance of supplemental funding for the military.

Earlier this week, Trump [indicated](#) that he would accept a budget deal that provided additional funding for border security, but no money for a wall. The White House also [agreed](#) to continue paying subsidies mandated by Obamacare. Had it held its ground on these issues, the likely result would've been a Democratic filibuster and a government shutdown.

In contrast, the Democrats may be amenable to spending more on defense, which they favor in principle but will only support in practice as part of a deal that addresses their domestic priorities. According to *The Hill*, Democrats actually [offered](#) \$15 billion of additional spending on defense in exchange for the continuation of Obamacare subsidies. At the moment, it is unclear whether any of this money will be ultimately be appropriated. Rep. Mac Thornberry, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, [said](#) "there is no final number or final answer until everything is locked down." Yet what if Trump had made a concerted effort to secure maximum funding for the military? It seems clear that there was a better deal to be had.

While the government's funding expires on Saturday morning, the House has already [voted](#) for a week-long extension of the deadline in order to finalize the details of an agreement, which the Senate is expected to vote on later today. Of course, the prospective deal could [fall apart](#). Only yesterday morning, the president unleashed a Twitter storm [saying](#) that "Democrats want to shut down the government" and [let](#) "illegals to pour through our borders." In a nod to defense issues, Trump did [say](#) that Democrats were "jeopardizing the safety of our troops" by risking a shutdown. Yet such 11th hour attacks are not what it takes to build a working majority on behalf of a defense buildup.

While important, this week's budget fight is only the opening round of what should be a four- or eight-year campaign to repair the damage done to the Armed Forces. In the coming months, Congress will take up the question of how much to spend on defense in 2018. If the president understands that he must become the troops' advocate-in-chief, then there is an opportunity

for substantial progress. If not, then Trump may find that will someday have to send American troops into battle without they equipment and training they deserve.