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Members of Congress for Peace through Law
American Security Council

WASHINGTON CLOSE-UP

How to Decipher the Arms Debate

By ORR KELLY

Is there any hope of making sense out of the national defense controversy?

Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird says the Russians may be building a new monster missile system, but Sen. William Proxmire, D-Wis., says we shouldn't be fooled into spending more for defense.

The Pentagon says Russia is surging ahead in the research race, but the Federation of American Scientists says, nonsense.

The military services are building a stable of new weapons, but the Members of Congress for Peace through Law (MCPL) says most of them will cost too much and probably aren't needed anyway.

What is the average citizen — or even the moderately well-informed senator or representative — to think, when the authorities differ so widely?

Here is a brief guide to the forces taking part in the national defense debate, and some evaluation of how much trust should be given to them:

First, it should be made clear that the debate is being carried on within fairly narrow limits. The Brookings Institution, in an analysis of the federal budget, says reasonable men can and do differ by about $20 billion on the proper size of the defense budget — from a high of about $85 billion to a low of about $65 billion.

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No one who expects his views to be seriously considered favors anything like a dismantling of our armed might. Proxmire hopes to cut the budget by about $7 billion, or only about 10 percent, for example. And no one who wants to be taken seriously favors a massive expansion of our might. Even Laird's recent warning that we might have to begin responding to the Soviet nuclear buildup with new weapons does not contemplate anything that would go beyond the Brookings guidelines.

Almost the entire debate, therefore, is being conducted within the "establishment" — but the real Establishment, the administration, has the first word. The annual reports to Congress by the defense secretary, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the service secretaries are immensely valuable sources of information on the nation's defense plans. Laird's report this year is available from the Government Printing Office for $2.

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In the middle, trying to provide an unbiased analysis, are such reports as the Brookings Institution's "Setting National Priorities, the 1972 Budget." It is available in cloth-cover form for $8.95 and in paperback for $2.95.

It contains a readable, balanced presentation of the arguments on both sides of some of the major defense issues, such as the number of troops that should remain in Europe and the proper size of our nuclear deterrent forces.

In a similar vein is the National Urban Coalition's "Counterbudget: A Blueprint for Changing National Priorities." It's available in paperback at $2.95. As its name implies, it is more an argument for a change in priorities than an analysis, but it recognizes that money for those priorities must come primarily from new tax measures and a healthy rate of economic growth, rather than simply from cuts in defense spending.

Much more partisan is the MCPL, whose military spending committee already has issued two reports—a reasonably balanced study of the B1 bomber and a sloppy, poorly researched report on the F14 and F15 fighter programs—and plans 11 or 12 more reports on major defense issues by the end of June.

The MCPL and the Council for a Livable World, which works more quietly with small seminars for members of Congress and newsmen, have offices in separate suites at 201 Massachusetts Ave. NE.

Around the corner at 203 C St. NE is the office of the Federation of American Scientists, which this year for the first time is making a major effort to get its views—largely critical of current defense policy—on the record in testimony before the committees that normally handle defense bills, rather than the special subcommittees that sometimes make hit-and-run raids on the defense budget.

On the other side of the fence is the American Security Council, 1101 17th St. NW, which has published three analyses over the last three years showing the military balance tilting in the Soviet direction. The ASC conducts a very broad direct-mailing operation and appears to be the best-financed of the groups actively engaged in the national defense debate.

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With all this help, it should be possible to make some sense of the major issues in the defense controversy. But the only way the truth can be reached, with everyone pushing a special point of view, is through a careful, skeptical review of what they all have to say. And then it will turn out to be not terribly more complicated to understand than baseball batting averages.

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