

## Readers write

## 'The military budget'

Res. the editorial "What does the Navy need?" (March 13):

I was pleased to see you emphasize the importance of defending sea lanes. I think it is a bit optimistic to believe that our capability to do this may not be endangered today because of the risks that the Soviets would face. If you are talking about their just cutting the sea lanes as an action independent of other military conflict, you have a point. Essentially the Soviets would be attacking a vital interest of the United States and clearly cannot afford to do that.

The issue, however, is: if we fall into a prolonged conventional conflict in Europe, à la World Wars I and II, could the Soviets cut us off? The scenario may seem improbable to many, and there is evidence that the Soviets are not giving high priority to planning for a campaign against our shipping in the Atlantic. They have higher-priority tasks closer to home. Neither the Kaiser nor Hitler made such preparations either.

However, in both instances as soon as war broke out they shifted the great bulk of their naval effort to that task. Also, in preparing for both of those wars, the Europeans and ourselves failed to look to this role and had to redirect the majority of our naval efforts also. In short, we all think a prolonged conventional war in Europe is a low-probability event, but our preparations for such a war are one form of deterrence of it, and the Atlantic sea lanes are an essential element of preparation that is being overlooked.

The fact that the Soviets have iced-in ports, geographical restrictions on the Baltic, insufficient air cover for their carriers and surface ships is not importantly relevant. The real threat to the sea lanes will come from the 150 submarines and the Backfire bombers in the Kola Peninsula. Neither is impeded by ice. The submarines do have to pass through the gap between Greenland and the United Kingdom but that's not as easy to bottle up as is the Baltic or the Black Sea. The Soviets don't have to bring their carriers or their surface ships out from under air cover to pose this threat.

I think comparing total numbers of ships or tonnages is more likely to mislead the American public than to help. Instead, there are several subissues in which one can compare commensurables. The first is the potential battle for the North Atlantic or the Pacific sea lanes. Here the issue is the large number of Soviet submarines and Backfires vs. the size of Allied defensive forces. Under these circumstances whether the Navy has 450 or 600 ships is more relevant when placed in these terms. Battles for sea control are wars of attrition, and you're going to have to take substantial losses before you have eradicated the threat.

Another comparison is whether we can project our power from the sea to the land as the Navy is designed to do. Here you can make judgments concerning where you want to do it. Sometimes the Navy talks about going up into the Norwegian Sea to take out the Soviet forces in the Kola Peninsula. Whether we could do that is one judgment. Remaining in the Mediterranean to project power onto the other is another similar judgment. In both of these it isn't 1,700 ships vs. 1,500 ships; it's what forces can be brought to bear in those circumstances.

If you hypothesize a US-Soviet naval conflict in some remote area of the world over some third-world issue, the 1,700 vs. 1,500 is almost totally irrelevant. Now we're down to the quality of the ships and the kinds of tactics they are prepared for, i.e., the US Navy is built around the aircraft carrier, and the Soviet Navy is built around the cruise missile from ships, submarines, and aircraft.

You rightly questioned whether the number 600 means anything. It would be more relevant to point out, however, that the prospect of going to 600 is almost nil. The most optimistic mathematics are that a ship lasts 30 years. To maintain our present fleet of about 480 ships you then have to build 16 ships a year. This is just about exactly what we have averaged for the past decade. To go to 600 ships in 10 years, you have to build 12 more ships a year — or a total of 28; in 20 years, six more ships a year, or 22, which is about what

they are discussing in the new Reagan budget.

Twenty years is a long time away. On top of that, 30 years is an unrealistic figure for the life of a ship. My estimate is closer to 22. At this number we have been sustaining only a 400-ship Navy over the last 10 years and would have to increase by 200 to get to a 600-ship Navy. Anything like 600 is just not in the cards in the foreseeable future.

I think you are quite optimistic to suggest that the argument you have made may indicate that additional funds for defense may not be necessary. The deferred maintenance, the need for more operational money, and the problems of personnel alone would tax our current budget. In addition, many of the suggestions for smaller units are not necessarily going to be less expensive.

Clearly the initial cost of small carriers is less than that of big carriers. One of the key reasons for going in that direction, however, is to have more carriers. In that way they are in more places at the same time; in that way you can be prepared for some losses in a war of attrition. Operating three small carriers will very likely cost you more money than operating one large carrier because there are efficiencies of scale.

One of the great risks I feel in advocating less sophisticated and less expensive systems is that the country will use that as an excuse for having one small carrier instead of one large carrier, etc. There is no question that one small carrier is less capable than one large one.

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