

Defense dollars . . .

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the hardware it needs without knowing just what it needs it for or how it serves the national interest.

It's not even possible to demonstrate that the countless trillions we've spent on defense since World War II has been money well spent, except to point out that, so far, we haven't been attacked.

It's like the way the old folk used to prove the efficacy of asafetida bags worn around the neck as a polio preventative: the kid hasn't got polio, has he?

The easiest thing is to do what most Americans have been doing: accede to the demands for incomprehensible new weapons systems, the best that American technology can dream up, even when you doubt that it will ever be used.

Think about the refinements in nuclear weaponry since the relatively crude little A-bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Whole generations of improvements have come and passed into obsolescence without ever having been used.

We get so wrapped up in questions like JFK's alleged missile gap we forget that, gap or no gap, we've never used the missiles. The odds seem overwhelming that we never

will.

And even if, through some tragic error, we found ourselves using them, the questions remain: What's wrong with the old ones our leaders used to tell us were capable of wiping out us? Will the clever new missiles wipe them out more effectively? Kill them a hundred times instead of a mere dozen?

Incidentally, the administration tells us we've got another missile gap. The Russians have 2,010 ICBMs and we've got only 2,000 — a fact that means nothing unless you also consider that we have twice the number of metropolitan areas as the USSR.

The experts say these things aren't the issue. The issue is deterrence: military credibility. If we stop developing new weapons, if we stop impoverishing ourselves with defense appropriations, the Soviets will read it as a sign of weakness and loss of military will.

The Soviet experts say the same thing as they spend themselves into bankruptcy. We both are obliged to remain strong — and not just strong but stronger than each other — because everybody knows that weakness invites aggression.

But does it? Does all the stockpiling of evermore sophisticated weapons really make us safer from enemy attack?

Was Iraq safer because it was believed to be developing nuclear capability?

If the Israelis are to be believed, the attack on Baghdad came precisely because Iraq was thought to be getting stronger.

The whole question of defense spending seems to have very little to do with defense. Since no one in authority really expects war on a global scale any more — for the simple reason that everybody understands that such a war would be unwinnable by either side — both U.S. and Soviet militarists have reduced military preparedness to a board game, a sort of missile-rattling Monopoly played with real dollars and rubles.

The point, if you think of it this way, is not what the money buys but how freely it is spent. Both sides dream up new and nightmarish weapons, not because it expects to use them, but because each new zillion-dollar outlay moves one side or the other temporarily ahead in the game.

Is it naive to hope that somebody — perhaps us — will decide that the game is silly and simply refuse to play any more? And if it happened, would anyone (aside from those involved in the manufacture of armaments) feel less safe?

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