



Tug of War

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Over the past month, our nation has been anxiously watching the “debt ceiling” tug of war play out on Capitol Hill. The debt ceiling, or limit, is the maximum amount of federal debt the government can incur at any given time. It must be raised to pay the nation’s bills to avoid a default, which, if ever reached, would send the U.S. economy into a tailspin and disrupt critically needed services. Treasury Secretary Yellen has estimated that we will reach the current limit of \$31.4tn on June 5th. What was once a routine vote has now become political theatre and brinkmanship—a tug of war between two parties seeking to score political points.

President Biden and Speaker McCarthy agreed to a compromise last weekend, and over this past week both chambers of Congress passed it in relative bipartisan fashion. As of this writing, it now awaits President Bidens signature before the Monday deadline. While the immediate debt default crisis may have been averted, the question is at what cost? The [99 page bill](#), in a nutshell, lifts the debt ceiling for two years in exchange for a cap (at 2023 levels) of annual federal discretionary spending on everything except the Pentagon and veterans’ programs. It also expands access but adds work requirements to safety net programs (TANF/SNAP), restarts student loan repayments, cuts IRS funding, and green lights a major gas pipeline, among many other provisions.

In this tug of war of our nation’s values, there seems to be only one clear winner—and it is not a political party. The only part of our budget exempt from the proposed cuts are the Pentagon and our nation’s broader military budget.

Even though the U.S. spends more than the next ten countries combined (most of whom are allies) on our military, unquestioned support cuts across party lines. Any sense of “parity” found in past budget negotiations that kept defense and non-defense spending balanced is now gone. Except for a small but vocal minority of members, Congress will keep finding new ways to pump more money into the Pentagon’s almost \$900bn budget, even beyond what it requests, while at the same time claiming their hands are tied to help the poor.

A report released last week by the Institute for Policy Studies and National Priorities Project brings this further into focus. “[The Warfare State: How Funding for Militarism Compromises our Welfare](#)” highlights how “over-militarized” our federal budget is and how such investments are making us less safe by underinvesting in human needs. The report includes budget lines often left out of consideration (such as veterans affairs, homeland security, and law enforcement) but which are all forms of our militarized society. Ultimately, in FY23, 62% of our federal discretionary budget went to fund these programs, including direct funding for wars and weapons as well as law enforcement, incarceration, detention, and deportation. This pull toward militarism is nothing new. What is different now is the escalation of these costs, both economic and human, such that the militarized budget has almost doubled since 2001—from \$587bn \$1.1tn now.

Seventy years ago, this past April, President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned of these trends in his speech titled “The Chance for Peace”:

- *Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.*

President Eisenhower saw the potential pitfalls of a military-industrial (and now Congressional) complex. While it is critical that Congress raised the debt ceiling to avert an economic crisis, the final deal represents a deeper moral crisis we face as a nation. We cannot let our nation’s values be pulled further off course. Together, let us work toward a more faithful budget by prioritizing human needs over the tug of war.

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