

Trump's Generals Fatten the Pentagon

President Trump's troika of generals may ease public fears about his irascible unpredictability, but they also are busy padding the U.S. military budget and fattening up friendly arms manufacturers, JP Sottile writes.

By JP Sottile

Americans are really counting on President Trump's vaunted team of generals who are widely regarded as "the adults in the room." Chief of Staff John Kelly, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Secretary of Defense James "Mad Dog" Mattis make up the much-touted troika that stands between Trump's itchy Twitter finger and the big red nuclear button.

This ring of rationality around the President has become paramount as Donald "The Dotard" Trump has engaged in an ever-escalating missile-size contest with North Korea's Kim Jong Un. Trump originally dubbed the unusually-coiffed leader "Rocket Man" before realizing that he'd better qualify the size of Kim's projectile by rechristening him as "Little Rocket Man" ... perhaps out of fear that someone might confuse Trump's campy criticism with rocket envy.

These latest, nerve-wracking salvos came after Trump went to the United Nations General Assembly to drop some Bannon-armed bombs on the global gathering. After telling the world how great his presidency has already been and how wonderful a world of fervent nationalism could be if we only tried, Trump went on to warn to Kim Jung Un that the United States is prepared to "totally destroy North Korea."

It was an unusual approach. It might even have violated the U.N. Charter. But he blew past all that when he weaponized his Twitter account to warn North Korea's Foreign Minister that North Korea's leadership "won't be around much longer!"

That, and some macho goading of the North Koreans with flybys by U.S. Air Force B-1B Lancer bombers, led to North Korea's Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho's declaration at a U.N.-adjacent presser that the North Koreans regard Trump threats as a "declaration of war." This "tit-for-tat" back and forth would be much funnier if the stakes weren't so damn high and the road to a possible conflict wasn't so damn low.

On the bright side, a well-known economist and head of Columbia University's Earth Institute just tried to reassure us all that in spite of Trump's "crude bravado" some real "progress is being made across the world and what is happening in the United States won't stop that" from continuing. Writing for the Observer (U.K.), Jeffrey Sachs said he sees America losing its grip on the title

of “indispensible” nation and also sees the world taking advantage of the space created by Trump’s histrionics. Some might even say that America seems to be “losing its grip” altogether.

Perhaps that’s why one of the “safe and sane” generals just issued a stark warning of his own. It got lost in the wild week of Trump’s temerity that ended up with the ultimate misdirection play when he blew his dog whistle on black athletes in the NBA and the NFL for protesting police shooting unarmed African-Americans. But make no mistake, one of the generals is keeping his eye on the ball. And sorry, Roger Goodell ... but there’s no doubt that this ball is filled with a lot of hot air.

Mad Dogs and Businessmen

According to Secretary of Defense Mattis, the land of the free and home of the brave is caught in a potentially deadly pincer action. Uncle Sam is trapped between a disastrous combo of crippling “defense caps” on Pentagon spending *and* a disorienting lack of “budgetary predictability.” This two-front war even has him “questioning whether or not America has the ability to survive.”

That’s right, folks ... Mad Dog believes Uncle Sam is staring down the barrel of an existential threat and it isn’t coming from a plump North Korean “Madman” or a group of Islamic freedom-haters or a Russian bear ambling around the world’s woods with a Cold War-Era grudge and an imperial eye on America’s God-given picnic basket. No, according to Mad Dog’s frothy assessment, taxpayers simply aren’t giving the military the money it needs to ensure America’s survival.

At least, that’s what he told the Air Force Association’s annual conference when he gave the keynote address just two days after the Senate passed a \$700 billion National Defense Authorization Act that delivered a fulsome 13 percent spike in defense spending over the previous year. They approved this world-dwarfing shopping spree by an overwhelming vote of 89-8. By the way, “world dwarfing” is not just a clever turn of phrase. This budget bonanza will exceed one-third of the world’s total spending on all things military.

And when the world does spend its relative pittance, it sure knows where to go ... because Uncle Sam also just logged a banner year as an international arms dealer with a “record setting” \$75.9 billion in sales thus far. That’s thanks, of course, to the “diplomatic” salespeople the State Department deploys around the world like so many Amway reps.

And then, just to put a cherry bomb on top of this year’s Beltway-busting sundae, the Senate’s big spenders gave the Pentagon two dozen more of Lockheed Martin’s profitable, if potentially useless, F-35 planes than the notoriously

extortionate Pentagon requested in the first place. Ka-ching!

Cap And Spend

The one thing Congress didn't do was nix the budget caps instituted under the Budgetary Control Act of 2011. At the time, the sweeping law resolved that year's "debt ceiling crisis" and, in a passing nod to fiscal responsibility, it placed across-the-board limits on government spending.

And since the defense budget is, in fact, part of the government's yearly transfer of wealth from taxpayers to the lavish troughs that circle the Beltway ... that meant the caps were even placed on the perennially sacrosanct defense budget. Last year, the so-called "sequestration" caps meant that defense spending was "curtailed" to a paltry \$618 billion.

So, in President Obama's final year, the United States "only" spent about \$20 billion more than China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, India, France, United Kingdom, Japan and Germany ... combined. And this world beating budget is the supposedly dire situation then-candidate Donald Trump kept harping on when he'd accused Obama of "depleting" America's military might. Now, armed with Trump desire to "rebuild" the world's biggest, most far-reaching military ... Congress is piling another \$80 billion on top of last year's already gargantuan budget banquet.

But Trump was sort of "preemptively correct" about the depletion of the military. That's because he significantly loosened rules of engagement governing bombing civilian targets. And that, in turn, has the Air Force crying poverty. Yup, while Congress was busy running up the budget, the military was busy running out of bombs, according to remarks given by Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson at the same Air Force Association confab. It's the direct result of our new "non-interventionist" President opening the bomb-bay doors over the Muslim world and, as a result, filling graves with civilians at a record rate.

But civilian deaths don't really cost anything. Bombs do. And through August, the U.S. dropped over 2,400 bombs on Afghanistan ... which blows away last year's 1,337 bombs dropped. The U.S. is also "dropping about 100 precision weapons per day" on ISIS, according to Secretary Wilson. And during just the month of August alone, the U.S. poured 5,075 bombs on Iraq and Syria. Uncle Sam even added 100-plus strikes on the hunger-wracked, disease-ridden people of Yemen.

Mattis Gratis

Of course, it didn't occur to Secretary Wilson or Mad Dog Mattis that the problem may have more to do with *too many targets* instead of *not enough bombs*. Then again, if you stop dropping all those bombs you'll stop getting all that money. To wit, Trump's much-discussed switcheroo on Afghanistan caused a nice

bump in the stock prices of Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman and Boeing.

Trump's Afghanistan speech also led to a "buy" recommendation for General Dynamics, which NASDAQ predicted would gain handsomely from Trump's Afghanistan "surge." Why? Because before Mattis joined the administration he pulled a tidy sum of \$594,369 for serving "as an 'independent director' of the multinational defense contracting behemoth."

But Mattis's old company isn't the only Beltway business getting more bucks by selling bigger bangs. Trump's long-stated willingness to spend like a drunken sailor made him a big hit with understandably bullish defense contractors. And some of those profitable patriots breezed through the revolving door from Raytheon, Boeing and 13 other defense and defense-related companies ... right into the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security, according to the indefatigable Lee Fang of The Intercept.

In fact, this revving-up of the revolving door was another big problem Mattis cited in his remarks to the Air Force Association. But the problem isn't what you might think. It's not that the same people who worked for defense contractors are all-too often put in acquisition-related positions that could benefit their "former" employers. Instead, Mattis believes the problem is that the Pentagon and the defense industry are *too far apart*. Mattis thinks that the buyers and the sellers need "closer ties" and "more robust lines of communication," as InsideDefense.com so aptly put it. Go figure.

Revolving Doors

To be fair, Mad Dog is partially talking about innovation when he sounds the alarm about America's dangerous unwillingness to "invest" in, among other things, "global strike, close air support, global intelligence, global mobility, global surveillance and global command and control," according to a DefenseNews report on his speech. And he said he wants to speed up "innovation" and promised to move "aggressively and swiftly take advantage of the opportunities that we see developing around us in the private sector."

Still, it's still quite a statement when you consider the long, well-established history of the Pentagon's waste, the defense industry's ability to bank on taxpayers' largesse and the role the revolving door has played in that annual transfer of wealth since the start of the Cold War. And it's also a bit of a kicker when you start to calculate the cost of America's "Global War on Terror," which ranges from \$1.7 trillion for just the direct funding of specific conflicts to \$4.79 trillion on the high end, which is the total Brown University's "Cost of War Project" arrived at when it tabulated all War on Terror-related spending.

Either way, there is little doubt that one of the least of America's problems is Mattis's "uncertainty" in the budgeting process or a lack of funding. Nor is the problem an unwillingness to invest in snazzy new weapons systems. And for a nation straddled with \$1.4 trillion in student debt alone, it's hard to make the case that funding is a problem when, according to one assessment, just the \$80 billion increase over last year's titanic defense budget is enough make *all* public colleges and universities tuition-free for a full year.

And, despite his best efforts to single-handedly exhaust America's lethal larder, it's harder still to stomach Trump's brassy claims about a military that's somehow been "depleted" when the forever war has filled defense industry coffers with trillions in taxpayer treasure. That's not even taking into account the \$1 trillion "upgrade" of the nuclear arsenal, which, of course, Trump touts as the super-duper result of his cunning plan to "beef up" America's biggest bombs when, in fact, it started under his predecessor. Not only is he committed to wiping Obama's name off of everything, but it's also that "size matters" thing, again ... right?

Sadly, that "size matters" thing is working like a charm for the defense industry. Trump's schoolyard posturing certainly helped push Lockheed's profitable THAAD missile defense system into South Korea. He's made sure the Persian Gulf remains a tony neighborhood filled with committed customers by probing ways to decertify the Iran Nuke Deal and by stoking Saudi Arabia's regional ambitions. And just like he promised, America is in fact pouring billions into "rebuilding" its "defenses."

And maybe that's the other reason why "The Generals" couldn't pass up an opportunity to "serve" in Trump's gold-plated administration. It's not just about making sure Trump doesn't unnecessarily fill a bunch of flag-draped coffins or start pushing buttons that do more than blow-up Twitter. Rather, the so-called "adults" may have also recognized that Trump's callow salesmanship offered a "can't miss" chance to go on a spending spree before emerging war-weariness and annual budgetary sequestration truly put a cap on their long-term budgetary ambitions. That's because "size matters" to them, too.

And it would also explain why Mad Dog is so rabid about getting those sequestration caps removed while Trump is busy throwing international hissy-fits and ginning-up the kind national insecurity the defense industry thrives on. But that doesn't mean America's survival is in jeopardy. Instead, it might mean that what's really in jeopardy is the Pentagon's long-term ability to convince taxpayers to give it and its "partners" on the other side of the revolving door anything they want ... and then some.

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