



## Peace Dead End

*It will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need and the air force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber.*

1960s bumper sticker

**A**FTER THE FALL OF THE BERLIN Wall in the ‘Peaceful Revolution’ of November 1989, and the subsequent breakup of the Soviet Union and easing of military tensions throughout Europe, suddenly nothing seemed impossible.

In its 1991 Human Development Report, the UN estimated that cuts of just 2 to 4 percent in global defense spending could redirect \$200-300 billion a year to increased social spending and humanitarian aid to poorer countries, and rhapsodized about the “enormous potential for restructuring national budgets” that would usher in “a secure future for human development.”

The reality was considerably less sanguine.

Bluntly stated, there was no peace dividend. There was no significant redirection of military budgets into domestic spending when the Cold War ended, and in fact, there hasn’t been since the end of World War II.

The concept of a ‘peace dividend’ actually dates back to 1969, when President Lyndon Johnson contemplated what should be done with the huge budgetary windfall that would result from winding down the Vietnam War.

The question proved moot, however, as the war continued for another six years, draining the nation’s financial resources while its infrastructure, industrial base, and educational system continued their decline.

At the end of the Cold War, the U.S. and its Western European allies did manage to initiate modest cuts in their defense budgets, but 80% of the \$81 billion saved in the U.S. went toward reducing the federal deficit, and only 20% toward domestic programs.

Furthermore, much of the latter went toward conversion of surplus military bases to public and commercial use and toward cleaning up the nation's vast network of toxic military sites, rather than funding new infrastructure, schools, or social programs. Direct conversion of military to civilian production—as promised by the 'swords into plowshares' metaphor—was forgotten.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, military spending once again soared, to fund both the open-ended 'War on Terror' and extended wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

More recently, President Obama ignored his campaign promise to "revitalize our military" in order "to foster peace," and President Biden actually managed to pull off what some observers called an "anti-peace" dividend, with an increase in the military budget of over \$40B and a decline in social spending of \$900B in 2022, despite the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

While numerous factors prevent the U.S. from enjoying a peace dividend, foremost among them is the emergence of the huge military-industrial complex in World War II, and its ongoing, relentless overtaking of every other sector of the national economy.

Military empires are costly, and the expense of maintaining over 800 military bases in 130 countries—as well as being the largest arms exporter in the world—would likely have doomed any opportunity for a peace dividend in peacetime, even if the U.S. had not been in almost constant conflict since the end of World War II.

Concurrent with this is the conversion of the capitalist economy from FDR's New Deal egalitarianism to neoliberalism, an ideology which advocates privatization, deregulation, and a private sector relatively unfettered by government oversight.

Most of all, establishing a peace dividend requires substantial political will and a clear, comprehensive, and coordinated strategy, none of which have emerged.

Polls consistently show that only a small minority of Americans favor the expansion of government expenditures on warmaking, while a majority support greater spending on health care, education, and Social Security.

The U.S. presently accounts for roughly half of the entire world's military spending, with a military budget approaching a trillion dollars accounting for more than half of all discretionary federal spending. In short, whenever the choice is between 'guns or butter,' it seems that guns always win out.

Nonetheless, the calls for a peace dividend continue. In 2021, over 50 Nobel laureates called for developed countries to cut their military spending by just 2% a year for five years, diverting half of the money saved (an estimated \$1 trillion) into a UN fund to combat poverty, the climate crisis, and the threat of emerging global pandemics.

Needless to say, despite being backed by broadly respected figures like the Dalai Lama, this proposal got no further than the many others that came before it.

Martin Luther King warned that "a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on its military than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that America continues to engage in pointless and costly wars overseas, not so much for any noble purpose as to justify maintaining its military spending at the elevated levels the Pentagon and military-industrial complex had long since become accustomed to.

The tragedy of the post-Cold War era is not just that there has been no peace dividend, but there has been no peace. ■