

Is Spending Cut a Threat to Air Power?

The public would do well not to go off the deep end, as some politically excitable members of Congress seem to be doing, in regard to the proposed cut in Air Force appropriations. It would be far better to await a clearer answer to certain questions before deciding that the administration is trifling with the nation's safety.

In the first place, it might be asked whether the proposed reduction in spending will be as crippling to our air power as some alarmed though not necessarily impartial voices in Washington represent. In his recent speech to the nation, President Eisenhower pointed out that even under the new spending program 60 cents out of every budgeted military dollar will go for air power and 40 cents will be spent by the Air Force itself. Does this sound as if the nation's air strength was suddenly being put on a starvation diet?

Defense Secretary Wilson told a Senate committee that almost four times as much will be spent on planes and parts in the next fiscal year as is being spent this year. Greater sums, according to the testimony, could not be spent if they were made available. Does this justify jumping to the conclusion that a plot is afoot for a dangerous hamstringing of air power buildup?

Another question to which the answer might well be awaited is whether the proposed allotment of funds will provide for building up air strength as rapidly as is practicable, without neglect of any of its essential phases. Gen. Nathan F. Twining, soon to become Air Force chief of staff, has assured that the heavy bomber program, our main atomic striking weapon, will be continued. Still another question is whether the program being studied by the administration would provide for a better Air Force in terms of modernity and effectiveness of its equipment rather than a bigger Air Force in terms of mere numbers of planes.

There is also the question of whether the so-called stretch-out in delivery dates for air equipment will result in a more sustained rate of buildup of military air power.

Above all, the excited critics should ask themselves whether they actually believe that President Eisenhower, whose whole career has been devoted to defense of his country, would embark upon a course calculated to put the nation's safety in grave peril. This is scarcely conceivable. It is no more conceivable that the President is being overruled in such an important matter by members of his administration, as some have seen fit to imply. Mr. Eisenhower himself has assured that to the problem of security and its cost he has given "careful personal study and analysis."

We do not profess to know the proper rate of spending for air power to produce the strength necessary for national safety, both short range and long range. But we have sufficient faith in President Eisenhower to be certain he will take no risks that, in his capable military judgment, would put the nation in a state of perilous weakness.

When politics and emotionalism are left aside, the situation in regard to the cut in funds seems to boil down to this: The rate of Air Force spending would not be affected during the next fiscal year, but some of the heavy carryover from year to year of unspent funds would be reduced. That might reduce spending in subsequent years, but that is not necessarily the case. Rather it would be possible for the administration to appraise each year's needs and for Congress to appropriate accordingly. Such a course does not seem to us to be in itself a threat to air strength but a sound method of procedure if the administration ever is going to get control over spending and have any chance to bring the budget into balance.