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Congress, Biden boost war spending at the expense of social programs

The massive omnibus budget bill passed by Congress and endorsed by President Joe Biden will cut social spending in real terms while increasing military spending and providing a further gusher of funds for the US proxy war in Ukraine against Russia.



House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) talks with Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) as Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) talks with House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) (Erin Schaff/Pool via AP) [AP Photo]

The omnibus legislation passed the Senate Thursday afternoon by a 68–29 vote, with all 50 Democrats and 18 Republicans supporting it, and 29 Republicans opposed. The bill raises domestic spending by \$42 billion, or 6 percent, and raises military spending by \$76 billion, roughly 10 percent.

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The legislation accounts only for discretionary federal spending, which is subject to congressional action each year. An even larger sum goes to automatic outlays, so-called entitlements, which include Social Security and Medicare payments, other small retirement and benefit plans, and interest on the federal debt, which will rise sharply next year as the Federal Reserve raises rates.

Besides the top-line numbers of \$858 billion for the military and \$772 billion for domestic programs, there is another \$80 billion in emergency spending, more than half for Ukraine, and the remainder to fund responses to US natural disasters like hurricanes, floods and wildfires. The White House proposal of \$9 billion to fund future responses to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic was dropped.

Since the US inflation rate is 7 percent, the 6 percent rise in domestic spending is a real-terms cut, meaning fewer real resources for health care, education, housing, mass transportation and what remains of social benefit programs like food stamps and home heating assistance.

By contrast, the budget raises military spending by 10 percent, to a record \$858 billion. There is an additional \$45 billion in aid to Ukraine, which combines financial support to the bankrupt regime in Kiev and direct military support. Total war spending is thus well over \$900 billion. An increase next year of similar proportions would put the military budget above \$1 trillion for the first time, a truly staggering sum.

The bipartisan budget deal between Senate Democratic leader Charles Schumer and Republican leader Mitch McConnell established for the first time that domestic spending would increase at a significantly lower rate than military spending.

McConnell gloated after the terms were made public early Tuesday morning, citing the much larger rise in military spending in comparison to domestic spending. “This is an impressive outcome for the Republican negotiators,” he noted, pointing to the “substantial, real-dollar increase” for the military, and the “substantial real-dollar cut” in non-military spending.

The top Republican on the Armed Services Committee, Senator Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma, said, “While this is not the package Republicans would have written on our own,” the allocation to the Pentagon “gives our military the resources needed to take on China, Russia and other looming threats.”

Senator Bernie Sanders lamented, “The defense spending is outrageous—much too high. But at the end of the day, I don’t want to see the government shut down, and there are some very important provisions in it.”

It was not a matter, however, of the Democrats caving in to Republican threats to block the passage of the omnibus and force a partial government shutdown. In reality, the Democrats enthusiastically embraced the huge military increase, and no longer advocate even nominal parity between domestic and military spending.

With the war in Ukraine, the Democratic Party has openly emerged as a party of rabid militarism. So fervent is the Democratic embrace of the proxy war against Russia—demonstrated in the rapturous reception for President Volodymyr Zelensky in his address to a joint session of Congress Wednesday night—that the fascistic right wing of the Republican Party has been able to posture as the only antiwar faction in official politics.

The Pentagon funding includes a 4.6 percent pay raise for uniformed military personnel and increases in virtually every area of procurement of new weapons systems for the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines, including 19 new warships and 69 new F-35 fighter jets (average cost \$80 million). The Department of Defense will also spend the largest-ever amount on research and development, \$140 billion, to devise and produce new weapons systems.

Much of what is classified as domestic spending is not for social needs like health, education and transportation, but for surveillance and repression, or operations in support of the military and US foreign policy. This includes \$61 billion for the Department of Homeland Security (up 5 percent), \$152 billion for “Military Construction and Veterans’ Affairs,” up a whopping 20 percent, \$60 billion for the State Department (up 6 percent), and \$39 billion for the Department of Justice, which includes the FBI and other federal police operations.

There are also sizeable sums that go directly into the coffers of major corporations and banks, including funds for the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Energy and Treasury.

The proportion of the budget devoted to activities which could conceivably benefit working people is well under 20 percent.

Even this spending is largely offset by provisions that will lead to further reductions in social benefits. The omnibus legislation allows states to begin kicking people off Medicaid, the joint federal-state health insurance program for the poor, as early as next April, when states can begin reviewing eligibility of recipients.

Eligibility has been frozen since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but Republican-run state governments have been demanding the restoration of their power to exclude

recipients from benefits based on more draconian eligibility requirements or direct funding cuts.

Despite much rhetoric to the contrary from Sanders and others, the Democratic negotiators dropped a proposal to restore the child tax credit to the levels that prevailed in 2020–2021 as part of pandemic relief. This expired in January 2022 and will not be revived because of opposition by Republicans and some right-wing Democrats such as Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

The bill would expand contributions to 401(k) plans (private retirement funds) by requiring most employers to enroll employees automatically and by providing a 50 percent federal match for the first \$2,000 in contributions. This will have the effect of directing even more of workers' earnings into the Wall Street casino, providing a new source of funding for the financial markets.

As the only legislative vehicle assured of escaping a Republican filibuster, the omnibus bill included not only the appropriations for every federal department and agency through September 30, 2023, but many other bills on issues entirely unrelated to the financing of the federal government.

The most important was a revision of the 1887 Electoral Act, the law regulating the certification of electoral votes cast in a presidential election, which was distorted by lawyers for Donald Trump to provide a legal cover for overturning his 2020 defeat.

The bill states explicitly that the vice president has only a ceremonial role in the congressional certification of electoral votes, and may not interfere by rejecting the electoral votes of any state. It also raises the number of legislators required to force a vote on certifying a state's electors from one senator and one member of the House of Representatives to one-fifth of the members of each chamber. It also specifies that only one slate of electors, certified by the governor, shall be submitted from each state.

In an expression of the anti-China frenzy in Washington, another provision bans the Chinese-made TikTok application from all government cellphones, laptops and other electronic devices.

There are countless other special provisions inserted by senators and congressmen in response to appeals from corporate lobbyists, lubricated by lavish campaign contributions. These are small only in comparison to the \$1.7 trillion total, but highly valuable to the corporate interests that promoted them.

Boeing, for example, was reprieved from a December 27 deadline to meet enhanced safety requirements on new models of its 737 MAX jets. The original model was grounded because of two disastrous crashes that killed 346 people.

Many more such provisions will be uncovered and made public as journalists and others investigate the 4,155 pages of the omnibus bill.

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