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America's budget has 'the wrong stuff'

By [David R. Francis](#)

Ben Cohen, cofounder of Ben & Jerry's, is occupied with something he considers "more important" than ice cream: cutting United States military spending by \$62 billion and redirecting the money toward education, feeding children around the world, and providing health insurance for American kids who don't have it.

A number of groups are campaigning to slash or redirect Uncle Sam's big spending - with limited success.

For instance, there's Citizens Against Government Waste, a watchdog group that sprang from the Grace Commission report on cost control in 1984. CAGW president Tom Schatz figures the federal budget, like the spending of many families, could be cut by 10 percent, eliminating wasteful "ineffective" programs without doing real harm.

President Bush's budget for fiscal 2007, now being considered by Congress, calls for outlays of \$2.77 trillion - not counting major supplemental funds for Iraq, Afghanistan, and hurricane Katrina.

The number is so big it may be mildly embarrassing. The \$2.77 trillion figure isn't even mentioned in the three-page White House overview of the 2007 budget, though the number can be approximated from an accompanying chart.

In January, the White House Office of Management and Budget estimated that the US deficit would be \$354 billion in fiscal 2007. The Congressional Budget Office said \$270 billion.

A surge in federal revenues in the current fiscal year offers hope that the CBO figure may be the more accurate one. A New York-based investment firm, Bear Stearns, currently forecasts a \$300 billion deficit in fiscal 2006, ending Sept. 30, well under the OMB's \$423 billion projection early this year.

One reason for the revenue surge, suggests the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington think tank often described as liberal, is that a larger chunk of national income has been flowing to the most prosperous Americans. They tend to have relatively high tax rates.

Groups seeking to restrain or redirect federal spending can be colorful. Mr. Schatz's CAGW, for example, each year publishes a "Congressional Pig Book Summary" with a fat pig drawn on its pink cover. It notes that in fiscal 2006, appropriators stuffed 9,963 "pork barrel" projects into 11 appropriations bills. Cost: \$29 billion.

Schatz maintains that CAGW's "16-year exposé" of waste has had some successes. Recently, these include knocking \$14 billion out of the emergency spending bill for the wars and Katrina and \$700 million for relocating a railway farther inland along the Gulf Coast.

Why hasn't CAGW had more success?

The incentives for members of Congress are for more spending, not less, Schatz says. They get political credit for bringing "earmarked" pork projects to their district or state. Extra spending is often rewarded with

campaign money.

To counter such incentives, citizens must pressure legislators to seriously tackle wasteful spending, Schatz adds. He wants presidents to get a line-item veto to help cut out wasteful projects.

Mr. Cohen uses his considerable marketing skills to push for major cuts in what he regards as the most wasteful federal spending of all - that of the military.

For instance: Between now and 2012, a group Cohen heads, Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities, plans to distribute more than 1 million free pens in New Hampshire and Iowa. The pens have two bar charts that pull out from the pen on a tiny window shade. One notes that while the US budget includes \$442 billion for defense and another \$287 billion for its close allies, Russia spends only \$65 billion, China \$55 billion, and the "Axis of Evil" just \$9 billion.

The US spends more than the rest of the world on the military and security.

An article Cohen wrote for AlterNet (serving alternate media) included a fake "help wanted" ad: "Enemy wanted. Serious enemy needed to justify Pentagon budget increase. Defense contractors desperate. Interested enemies send letter and photo or video (threatening OK) to Enemy Search Committee, Priorities Campaign."

More seriously, Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities helped sponsor a nonpartisan task force of 18 top security and foreign policy experts that in a May report suggested \$62 billion in cuts to the defense budget "mostly to weapons systems that have scant relevance to the threats our nation faces."

Chances of such sizable cuts happening are probably slim. "There is a kind of reflexive belief among politicians that the public equates the amount of defense spending with how strong the country is," says Cohen. "They are desperately afraid of being called weak on defense."

Moreover, the "military-industrial complex" has, with intent, spread spending on various weapons projects across so many congressional districts that canceling a project becomes most difficult.

Workers, notes Cohen, are organized across the country "to make a lot of noise if there is talk of canceling a system."

"Buying stuff that doesn't contribute to security undermines real security," says Lawrence Korb, coauthor of the Priorities task force report and an analyst at the Center for Defense Information in Washington. The wasted money runs up the budget deficit, which is financed in good part by China - a country "that could be your enemy some day," he says. The waste takes money away from, say, building a bigger, better-paid army.

Cohen even uses cookies in a video to advocate defense cuts. See: www.TrueMajority.org and click on "Serious Fun."

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