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## Major Arms Soar to Twice Pre-9/11 Cost

By Bryan Bender  
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### ***Systems to have little direct role in terror fight.***

Washington - The estimated costs for the development of major weapons systems for the US military have doubled since September 11, 2001, with a trillion-dollar price tag for new planes, ships, and missiles that would have little direct role in the fight against insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The soaring cost estimates -- disclosed in a report for the Republican-led Senate Budget Committee -- have led to concerns that supporters of multibillion-dollar weapons programs in Congress, the Pentagon, and the defense industry are using the conflicts and the war on terrorism to fulfill a wish-list of defense expenditures, whether they are needed or not for the war on terrorism.

The report, based on Defense Department data, concluded that the best way to keep defense spending in check in the coming years lies in "controlling the cost of weaponry," especially those programs that the Pentagon might not necessarily need.

The projections of what it will cost to acquire "major weapons programs" currently in production or on the drawing board soared from \$790 billion in September 2001 to \$1.61 trillion in June 2006, according to the congressional analysis of Pentagon data.

Costs for some of the most expensive new weapon systems -- such as satellite-linked combat vehicles for ground troops; a next-generation fighter plane; and a cutting-edge, stealth-technology destroyer for the Navy -- are predicted to cost even more by the time they are delivered, because many of them are still in their early phases. In a quarterly report to Congress on weapons costs earlier this month, the Pentagon reported that of the \$1.61 trillion it thinks it will need for big-ticket weapons, it has spent more than half so far -- about \$909 billion.

But the huge increase in weapons costs is already placing enormous strain on the federal budget, according to government budget specialists, who predict major increases in defense spending for years to come so that the Pentagon can afford all the weapons it has on the books. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, for example, estimates that between 2012 and 2024 the Pentagon budget will have to grow between 18 percent and 34 percent over what was appropriated this year.

Overall, annual defense spending has increased by about 11 percent per year since 2001, to about \$400 billion this year, not including hundreds of billions of dollars that Congress has set aside to pay for military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Military operations and maintenance costs, as well as salaries and health benefits for people in uniform, have all gone up by about 40 percent.

But the price tag for major weapons has garnered new attention from watchdog groups and government auditors, who contend that many of the arms already on the drawing board don't have much to do with ongoing combat or the war on terrorism.

In fact, most of the weapon systems being designed, tested, or built had been in the Pentagon's pipeline long before the Sept. 11 attacks. Despite the steep price jump, there has been a relatively modest increase in the number of new weapons projects over the past five years, according to Pentagon figures.

Still, "only a portion of these increased costs are a result of the war on terror," said Winslow Wheeler , a former congressional budget specialist now at the nonprofit Center for Defense Information in Washington and the author of "The Wastrels of Defense ."

The weapons projects designated as "major acquisition programs" require at least \$365 million in research funding and \$2.1 billion in acquisition costs. They include new armored vehicles; two new fighter jets; an advanced Navy destroyer; a package of land, air , and space-based missile defense systems; and sophisticated electronic and intelligence systems such as a new satellite communications network.

Defense specialists attribute the spiraling costs to a variety of factors. Some projects have increased in scope, while other weapons systems have taken longer to acquire, adding to the cost. Other projects turned out to be far more expensive than project managers and contractors predicted.

For example, the Future Combat System, a high-tech fleet of armored combat vehicles being developed by the Army , was forecast to cost \$92 billion when its development began in 2003, according to the GOP committee's report. As of December 2005, however, the price tag had skyrocketed to \$165 billion, about an 80 percent increase in just two years.

The Government Accountability Office, the government's nonpartisan audit bureau, warned of "the risks of conducting business as usual," and concluded in a report in November that the major weapons programs are at "high risk" for fraud, waste, abuse , and mismanagement.

The Department of Defense "has experienced cost overruns, missed deadlines, performance shortfalls, and persistent management problems," the report said. "In light of the serious budget pressures facing the nation, such problems are especially troubling."

The GOP committee report was blunt about the impact of rising weapons costs on the federal budget, and expressed little confidence that Congress has the political will to reign in spending on weapons that are not critical to the war effort. Noting that "every project has local employment implications," the report said "weapon system politics" will make it extremely difficult to make cuts.

"Controlling the long-term costs of the Pentagon's arsenal are very nearly as complex as restraining the cost of government entitlements like Social Security and Medicare," the analysis said.