Boondoggle-35

The U.S. government is infamously in debt. Since about 2012, the official national debt has equaled or exceeded the GDP. Shockingly, the real fiscal gap is much higher: with our $21.5T GDP and $22.5T official debt, we also have about $200T in unfunded liabilities over the next few decades. Most of that last number is due to programs such as Medicare and Social Security, but our regular debt comes from accumulated deficits: the U.S. government spends more each year than it steals in taxes. Since theft is its primary source of income, this situation is not sustainable.

The single largest item in the 2019 federal budget (contributing heavily to the aforementioned deficits and unfunded liabilities) is Social Security. The second-largest item is defense. The U.S. government spends more on defense than any other country in the world – by far. In fact, it spends about as much as the next eight countries combined. That is to say, the U.S. defense budget is approximately equal to the combined defense budgets of China, Saudi Arabia, India, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan.

Is spending of that magnitude necessary, or even remotely justifiable? Probably not. We've all heard infamous examples of gross waste and financial incompetence in the DoD – from $21T over a couple of decades that wasn't correctly accounted for, to $1,280 cups, $999 pliers, and $640 toilet seats.

One of the biggest boondoggles in the U.S. DoD budget – and the focus of this article – is the F-35, AKA the most expensive weapons system in history. And of course, the costs continue to go up, according to a recent DoD report. The Pentagon first put out the project for bids in 1996, and the first F-35s were manufactured and flown in 2006. However, it wasn't until 2018 that they saw combat for the first time when Israel deployed them. Since then, the USMC, USAF, and RAF have used them in combat only rarely. For a plane that is supposed to be sufficiently versatile and modular to replace virtually all other combat aircraft, the F-35 has been used very little.

Perhaps you're wondering if this is a typical timeframe for a high-tech military project. Well, in 2001, the DoD expected to have its first combat-capable F-35s in 2010. That did not

happen, not by a long shot. At least as late as 2013, these 5th Generation fighter jets could not fly in bad weather or at night. Despite all this, the F-35 program will cost about $1.5T, or approximately what the U.S. government spent on the entire Iraq war.

Last year, Defense News identified thirteen significant deficiencies in one or more F-35 models: from the possibility of a blown tire destroying the entire aircraft, to inadequate vision and sensor systems, to not being to fly too high, too fast, or in certain maneuvers without either apparent or actual major problems. Other issues included logistical and

security concerns. Many of these have solutions in progress, although several additional issues with the weapons systems have been identified since then.

How does a project like this happen, and continue, despite perpetual problems? There are 1,400 subcontractors for the F-35 program, spread out over 307 congressional districts in 45 States. For those of you unfamiliar with the U.S. political system, that means there are 307 Congressmen (out of 435) and 90 Senators (out of 100) who have constituents whose livelihoods depend in whole or in part on the F-35 program.

Even the extraordinarily liberal (and openly socialist) Senator Bernie Sanders claims to oppose the program but supports having it partly based in Vermont, so his constituents can benefit from the subcontracting jobs.

It's not just U.S. politicians who are financially committed to this disaster: there are eight other countries involved in the development of the F-35.

I don't have a solution to the issues presented here. Really, since I oppose U.S. involvement in all the wars I'm aware of, I don't really want to see the F-35 used more than it has been. Probably the myriad problems will be solved eventually, and perhaps most of the money to be wasted in this program has already been spent.

So, what's my point? I want to draw your attention to absurd levels of waste and inefficiencies inherent in the government system, and I want to suggest that such waste is inevitable in the system as it stands.

What do you think? Is the system fixable? How would you fix it, or what system would you replace it with?