

Preface

The defense budget provides the resources and authorities for the nation's military to deter aggression and, if necessary, defeat aggressors. Its adequacy and composition reflect America's priorities in dealing with threats to our national security. Those threats are growing in potential severity and spreading throughout the world. Yet the defense budget has experienced wild fluctuations in recent years, from sequester starvation to sizable increases of uncertain duration. Worse yet, it has often been subject to significant delays beyond the start of the fiscal year.

Shortly before the COVID-19 lockdowns, a small group at the Hoover Institution began discussions about bringing together leading experts from the military, government, academe, and think tanks to debate and discuss ways to improve defense budgeting. The idea was to assemble leaders with backgrounds in national security, economics, budgeting, diplomacy, politics, and history, to share their ideas and perspectives. The topics to be covered included each of the major interrelated areas necessary to understand the strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities involved in reforming the defense budget, and not just within the context of the budget itself but also among the myriad processes that produce it. The goal was to better enable a more effective national security.

So the informal Hoover Institution working group on defense budget reform, under the auspices of Hoover's National Security Task Force, began a series of meetings at Hoover and in Washington, in person and via videoconferencing, with several dozen leading experts, to broaden and deepen our understanding of how the defense budget, budget process, and Pentagon operations affect preparedness and the ability to execute in the field. The National Security Task Force had been established with late former secretary of state George P. Shultz and Admiral (Ret.) James O. Ellis Jr. as cochairs.

The traditional formal name for Hoover is the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, so it is not surprising that from its inception it has placed a high priority on national security studies and archival materials. For example, every year, Hoover brings together high-potential midcareer national security affairs fellows from every US military service plus the State Department to spend a year at Hoover, each working on an important project in between command postings. These fellows interact extensively with Hoover scholars in economics, international relations, political science, and other areas, as well as those directly concerned with national security. And Hoover scholars have always included former—and sometimes future—leaders from the military and diplomatic arenas.

In fact, shortly after World War II, President Harry S. Truman called on former president Herbert Hoover to lead a commission on the organization of the executive branch to suggest reforms, including for the Pentagon, as the nation and federal government transitioned from a wartime to peacetime posture. The commission's members included Dean Acheson and James Forrestal. The Hoover Commission recommendations, strongly endorsed by President Truman in a message to Congress, to grant "an adequate measure of authority and flexibility" and that the "ability of department heads to carry out their responsibilities not be impaired by numerous detailed statutory regulations" echo to this day.

A quarter century later, David Packard became deputy secretary of defense and, among other tasks, worked on streamlining the Pentagon with better business practices. Then under secretary of defense William J. Perry (later secretary of defense) spearheaded the use of advanced technologies for precision weaponry that would offset superior numbers of conventional weapons among US adversaries (e.g., Soviet tanks). In recent years, Hoover scholars have included multiple former secretaries of state, secretaries of defense, national security advisors, top military brass, and many who have served and continue to serve in other positions, each of whom has contributed enormously to Hoover's intellectual vitality. Many were also participants in the conference, "Rethinking Defense Budgeting," held at Hoover on January 19, 2023, where the papers and presentations collected in this volume were originally presented.

Defense Budgeting for a Safer World: The Experts Speak is the result of that collaboration. It brings together in one place analysis of, and ideas to strengthen, the nation's ability to deal with: the threats to our national security; a comprehensive national security strategy to guide it; military

procurement, technology, and innovation; personnel, talent acquisition, and management; and reform options and recommendations and the politics of defense budgeting as viewed from Congress.

There are many opportunities and options for reform to strengthen the security of the United States and the world by combining efficiency actions, realignment of priorities, and greater flexibility with the additional spending necessary to do the job. Whether the nation has the political will to seize the best of them with the urgency required remains an open question. In the face of an ever-more dangerous world, our national security in the coming years depends on doing so. We hope the papers and presentations by leading experts in this volume will serve as a valuable resource in that effort.

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