

Unpacking Bernie Sanders’s Stance on Defense

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Bernie Sanders has been advocating for federal budget reform for years, and one focus thereof is directed towards the US defense budget. What does this position look like exactly and how does it play out with the history of his ideology and the beliefs of the American people? The ever-growing prominence of our military has resulted in large portions of government resources to be dedicated to defense. Currently, the defense budget has stood at over \$700 billion dollars, supporting areas like intelligence, defense in foreign countries, the development of weapons and technology, and funding for the War on Terror. From a capitalist standpoint, maintaining a powerful military is crucial to maintaining important economic factors, such as trade routes.

Militarism is considered by some of the leading socialist thinkers to be inconsistent with socialist aims and contrary to the promotion of wellbeing for the people of the world. By way of example, we can turn to the life and work of Eugene Debs, who was jailed in 1919 under charges of sedition for speaking out against US involvement in the First World War. In June of 1918, Debs addressed an audience of over one thousand people to promote antimilitarism from the perspective of workers’ rights. From his standpoint, workers had often comprised a large portion of the military, but hadn’t the right to voice their opinions in military matters. Instead, this power was concentrated within a small elite group of people, generally the political and industrial leaders of the country. He also argued that just military actions are only legitimate when they reflect the will of the majority, especially considering the risk of injury and death these people face as a result of military conflict. The consolidation of resources for military affairs neglects pressing domestic issues, whose solution would impact the wellbeing of the people. Moreover, the composition of the military in wartime draws from the common person, who would then engage in combat with the common person of the enemy country. From the perspective of Eugene Debs, a crucial reference for Sanders, warfare benefits the ruling authorities while the common man on both sides loses

During the Vietnam War Sanders applied for conscientious objector status to avoid service. While this application was later denied, his age at the time of this denial made him ineligible for [service](#). Decades later, Sanders [hardened his stance](#) on international US military operations with his votes against the Gulf and Iraq Wars. The Sanders approach to international disputes, issues, and security focuses largely on diplomatic efforts, coalition building, the promotion of international rights, and other measures instead of the use of the nation’s military. Commonly recognized as the most powerful military in the world by numerous standards, the US military is an influential tool that has been closely associated with US foreign policy since the start of the Cold War in [1945](#). The military has operated in Panama, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Kuwait, and numerous other countries. In fact, in 2019 alone the military was utilized in 22 different [African countries](#). While strongly opposing both state sanctioned violence and non-state violence, such as acts of terror, Sanders is a prominent advocate for decreasing the degree to which defense consumes federal resources. A primary focus of this position is to eliminate wasteful spending and instead direct this funding to domestic issues like education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Moreover, he opposes the current level of funding to private corporations contracted by the Department of Defense. It is estimated that these groups receive almost 50% of total defense [funding](#).

It is evident that Sanders echoes the antimilitarism stance of Debs, an idol of the Democratic Socialist. However, the evolution of the US military in both scope and purpose is a

relevant consideration in breaking down differences between the times of Debs and Sanders. During the First World War, the United States was not recognized as a prominent warfighting country; in fact, in many ways it relied on antiquated armaments and strategy. Since then the military has changed in many ways. It is no longer a force of conscription, but rather an all-volunteer force (AVF) that is more professional and better equipped than conscripted forces. Moreover, technological advancements have drastically increased the ability of armed services to prepare, observe, and protect US and international interests on a dime. Sanders holds that rooting out inefficiency and waste within the defense community is crucial to any federal budget reform approaches. Moreover, Sanders is deeply concerned with the unilateral power over defense possessed by the Executive branch following the allocation of power to the Bush Administration after the September 11th attacks. His resolution is to return this power to Congress, cut specific funding over the course of several years, encourage greater foreign coalition leadership, and reduce or discontinue subsidies for the sale of US defense products to foreign [consumers](#). Additionally, Sanders advocates for the discontinuation of specific projects, such as funding for additional B-2 “Stealth” bombers and overzealous plans for military installations in outer [space](#).

Sanders’ position is one that faces opposition from not only GOP members of Congress, but many Democrats as well. Opponents have concerns about broad budget cuts in [defense](#). Moreover, in a poll by Gallup around half of Americans believe that the current defense spending is “about right,” while only 31% indicate spending is too high. Similarly, a majority of Americans (61%) are satisfied with the current strength of national defense. Interestingly, this percentage of Americans supporting current defense spending levels is at an all-time [high](#). This suggests that the American public would be less likely to rally behind Sanders’ efforts to cut defense spending.

I believe that Sanders’ prioritization of domestic issues over military spending is warranted and consistent with his policy standpoints over time; however, I find numerous issues with his specific approach. The scope of our military’s size and resources has resulted in a continuous drive to be involved in the affairs of foreign countries, often regardless of that country’s position on US involvement. Typical operations include disaster relief, the protection of maritime trade routes, conflict deterrence, medical care, and infrastructure support. However, the military is often used to support national economic interests that may be damaging to the international community, causing more harm than benefit. In order to ensure that the mission and purpose of the Armed Services are upheld, the defense budget must be intensely analyzed under a cost-benefit framework to the smallest degree possible. Furthermore, I believe that Sanders may not be the most qualified individual to assess defense related spending in fine detail. Previously Sanders has opted for a “blind” cut of 10%, while others favor an auditing process conducted through the [Pentagon](#). Opponents say that strategic reduction is the only acceptable method, a point that I entirely agree with. However, we will see how Sanders progresses this issue as legislation begins to be discussed in Congress.