

US is running out of arms — blame Congress

“Protecting our nation from those who would do us harm is the first and most important responsibility of government.” That’s from the website of Sen. Amy Klobuchar, a Minnesota Democrat. But it could be any lawmaker, or any president, Democrat or Republican. Almost all proclaim it, and by their own standard, almost all are failing — as they have for years, with no end in sight.

The U.S. still maintains the world’s most powerful military. Those unmatched capabilities provide deterrence, global influence and economic prosperity. There’s just one problem: We’re running out of bullets.

In Washington, D.C., the preferred parlance is “munitions shortage,” a development that some military analysts are calling a crisis. In plain English: Stockpiles of critical offensive and defensive missiles are severely depleted and shrinking, and our domestic industrial base is inadequate to the task of swift replenishment.

Worse than that, Democrats and Republicans in Congress are dithering, as is lawmakers’ habit when bipartisan cooperation and difficult votes are required. President Donald Trump, for his part, is insisting — predictably — that this issue is a fiction perpetrated and perpetuated by a “treasonous” media.

This challenge is hardly the fault of this Congress, or this president, alone. But it does exist, and it is jeopardizing military readiness, limiting America’s strategic options and limiting — to borrow Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth’s favorite word — lethality.

“This is not a way for a global leader like the United States to treat a military it expects to be able to respond to crises anywhere at any time and fight and win without question,” former Defense Department comptroller Elaine McCusker told me. “The crises we face now come from years of decisions — across administrations and sessions of Congress.”

For the fiscal year ending Sept. 30, the Pentagon was given roughly \$1 trillion. That’s not chump change, and no doubt some taxpayers might be interested to know where their money went, if not to restock dwindling munitions inventories.

McCusker, who has studied and written about this issue extensively as a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, explained that approximately 60% of the armed forces’ budget is prioritized for “must pay” bills related to operations, sustainment and personnel: Salaries and benefits like healthcare; upkeep of military bases, which are languishing; as well as troop training and combat exercises.

That leaves about 40% for both weapons innovation and modernization and (theoretically) for refilling equipment and ordnance reserves.

And as defense sources have emphasized to me during conversations over the past several weeks, there is even less cash available for those crucial priorities, because the military was ordered into battles neither Trump nor

Congress had budgeted for, including continued action in the Caribbean and an Iran war now in its seventh month.

But the source of the problem long precedes the Iran war — and, for that matter, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The seeds of today’s munitions shortage were planted in our 1990s Cold War triumph over the Soviet Union.

Washington treated that victory as an opportunity to significantly reduce military spending, essentially forcing consolidation of the defense industry and related supply chains.

In ensuing years, White Houses and Congresses under both political parties declined to update stockpiles that were slowly becoming outdated. Compounding the error, the government also allowed munitions manufacturing capacity to atrophy (to say nothing of military shipbuilding).

So, even if Congress and Trump flipped on the spending spigot tomorrow, fresh missile supplies wouldn’t roll off assembly lines for at least two years, likely longer.

There are several armaments on the dangerously deficient list, among them interceptors that shoot down enemy aircraft and incoming missiles, plus long-range precision missiles used by the Army and Navy in offensive operations. So, what’s the holdup? Partisan politics, naturally, not to mention lousy to nonexistent negotiating by the Trump administration.

The White House practically ignores Congress. Trump did not seek an authorization for use of force in Iran, and only belatedly sought supplemental legislation to fund a conflict he refuses to call a war.

This stiffarm approach has generally frustrated Republicans but has especially rankled Democrats and unnecessarily complicated military appropriations.

Yes, Republicans are sympathetic to Pentagon requests to boost defense spending. But they often disagree among themselves over how much money to approve and how to spend it, a byproduct of the party’s threadbare majorities in the House of Representatives and U.S. Senate. Democrats, meanwhile, are philosophically less inclined than Republicans to approve trillion-dollar-plus military budgets.

And as expected, they’re not in a hurry to do this or anything at Trump’s behest. But Democrats are lately more resistant than usual to greenlighting any amount of money, for any military purpose.

They fear doing so would function as a de facto supplemental funding bill for the Iran war that Congress has never signed off on.

Voters, they worry, would view such legislation as tantamount to financing a conflict that is unpopular with voters broadly, and grassroots liberals specifically, when midterm elections are just around the corner.

The perilous irony is that this sort of incompetent government inaction is it’s the surest way to invite another sort of unpopular war — the sort forced upon us by a hubristic adversary that we have no choice but to fight. History is watching; America’s enemies are, too.



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BLOOMBERG OPINION



Trump is claiming success in drug strikes — not so fast

Last Wednesday came and went as if it was an ordinary day. But the date held significance: It marked the one-year anniversary of Operation Southern Spear, the Trump administration’s military campaign against drug trafficking organizations based in Latin America.

That campaign, which includes airstrikes against alleged drug-carrying vessels on the high seas and the occasional deployment of U.S. special operations forces, continues to this day. The results have been far less impressive than the White House claims.

As the White House tells it, Operation Southern Spear is meant to tackle drug trafficking in a different way. President Donald Trump, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Secretary of State Marco Rubio spent the months before the operations began making the case about why the old way of fighting the so-called war on drugs was grossly ineffective.

There was so much cocaine and fentanyl pouring into the country, they said, that business as usual was not only a poor prescription for the problem but also akin to enabling the very national emergency — drug addiction — that continues to kill tens of thousands of Americans every year. Simply interdicting drugs and arresting the perpetrators, Rubio alleged, didn’t work.

“What will stop them is when you blow them up, when you get rid of them,” he declared.

The Trump administration has spent the last year trying to make good on that statement. Cartels in Mexico and gangs in Ecuador are now considered to be in the same league as al-Qaida and the Islamic State — this, despite the fact that cartels have no political ideology and are predominately concerned with making money, not overthrowing governments.

Washington has listed nearly two dozen Latin American drug trafficking groups as foreign terrorist organizations, a designation U.S. officials argue provides them with unique authorities they otherwise wouldn’t

have. Any person even remotely connected to these groups, whether it’s the poor fisherman being pressured to work for them or the teenager peddling drugs on the street corner, is now fair game for U.S. targeting.

Over a year’s time, the United States has conducted 68 strikes on small boats in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific that U.S. officials assessed were smuggling drugs up north. More than 225 people have been killed. The Pentagon has made a

big show of these strikes, posting clips of exploding vessels on social media and giving speeches outlining all of the supposed success the United States is having.

As one Pentagon official told reporters last week, Trump made a promise to the American people to “take the fight to the cartels and narco-terrorists who have poisoned our communities for far too long.”

Fair enough. Ask any American about getting tough on criminals, and many likely would express support. But just because U.S. officials are claiming success doesn’t necessarily mean it’s true.

In fact, the boat strikes don’t seem to be doing much of anything to reduce the flow of drugs to the United States, a conclusion analysts at the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Pentagon’s own intelligence agency reaffirmed in their own assessments. By waging an actual war on drugs, the powers that be in Washington are confusing tactical accomplishments with strategic ones.

If the boat strikes were truly working, we would be seeing two things happening. First, U.S. agents would be seizing fewer drugs at the southern border. And second, the price of drugs on the street would rise because of the squeeze on overall supply.

With respect to cocaine, the predominant narcotic that cartels in South America produce and smuggle to the United States, we aren’t seeing either trend. According to the most recent data available by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, approximately 63,200 pounds of cocaine were seized at the border in the 10

months since the boat strikes began — a nearly 1% increase from the same time period prior to the campaign.

In other words, there has actually been more cocaine heading north, not less. As a result, cocaine retail prices have remained stable despite the dozens upon dozens of U.S. airstrikes authorized since last September.

In short: If the Pentagon’s intention is to deter the cartels from trafficking drugs here, it has failed.

At best, the boat strikes are forcing traffickers to search for alternative routes and modes of delivery. At worst, they’ve made the job of the DEA even harder.

Trump, however, can take some pride in the fentanyl numbers. U.S. border officials registered a 45% drop in fentanyl seizures between 2024 and 2025, and the number is projected to decline again once this year is out.

But these figures have nothing to do with the U.S. military activity that’s occurring in Latin American waters. Mexico produces fentanyl, not countries in South and Central America.

The drop in fentanyl exports has far more to do with the cooperation Washington is receiving from Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum’s government as well as the technology-driven measures U.S. border agents are making at legal points of entry.

In the months to come, the Trump administration will likely expand its war on the cartels to land targets. U.S. special operations forces are already operating in Ecuador to help that country’s own battle against gangs. Colombia’s new far-right president, Abelardo de la Espriella, was quick to join Trump’s counter-cartel coalition after he assumed office and approved joint operations with U.S. forces against the criminal outfits now occupying swaths of Colombia. In June, the United States even conducted a strike in Venezuela to eliminate the head of the Tren de Aragua criminal network.

Whether any of this will produce the victory Trump is so desperate to declare remains to be seen. But based on what we’ve, don’t bet on it.

POLITICAL, CANDIDATE ENDORSEMENT POLICY FOR NOV. 3 ELECTION

The Messenger-Inquirer is now accepting political and candidate endorsement letters for the Nov. 3 general election. The deadline for all letters will be 5 p.m. Oct. 23. Neither endorsement nor political letters against any candidate will be accepted after that deadline. All letters must be 250 words or less, the author must be a resident of Daviess County, must include the author’s name, address and contact (phone numbers and exact addresses are for authentication purposes only and will not be published with the letter.) Anonymous letters will not be accepted. The Messenger-Inquirer reserves the right to reject any letter based on the newspaper’s ethical standards and any that does not follow the policy. Letters can be submitted through the Messenger-Inquirer’s website — www.messenger-inquirer.com/site/forms/online_services/letter/.

IN MY VIEW GUIDELINES

In My View is a column for readers. Criteria for accepting In My Views are largely subjective and at the discretion of the editorial board of the Messenger-Inquirer. Generally, content must require the space (350 to 850 words), which is substantially longer than letters to the editor. The subject must appeal to a wider audience, usually be about a local issue and the column should clearly argue a point and present an easily understood point of view. Assertions of facts should be accompanied by attributions. After submission, the writer may be asked to reduce the column to letter length (250 words or less) if the longer length is not justified.

If you would like to write an In My View column, call Don Wilkins at 270-691-7299 to talk over your idea.