

Why throw money at defense when everything is falling down around us?



By **Steve Lopez**

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Why does the U.S. keep throwing money at defense when everything is falling down around us?

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In 2012, the entrance to John Marshall High School in Los Feliz was closed to protect students from falling debris. The gothic tower above the entrance was crumbling, so a wooden platform was built atop a tunnel of scaffolding to catch falling brick and concrete.

Three years later, the scaffolding is still there. The district earmarked roughly \$1 million for the job long ago, and the principal told me last week that she's hoping it won't be much longer now.

But who can say?

I pass that school frequently, and for me, the scaffolding is a constant reminder of the shabby state of our schools and other public investments in California and across the nation. In Los Angeles, water mains are bursting, roads are cratered and sidewalks ruptured.

Here and elsewhere, the problem is lack of funding, lack of leadership and poor use of existing funds. But really, this is a story about national priorities in a country that is poised to invest \$1.5 trillion in the accident-prone F-35 fighter jet but takes years to fix a crumbling high school tower.

When I wrote about Marshall two years ago, I mentioned the school's gymnasium, where traffic cones and crime scene tape were used to cordon off holes and other hazards. At the time, I learned that L.A. Unified had a backlog of more than 30,000 deferred maintenance projects and nowhere near enough money to make a dent in the problem.

This is the way it goes nationally. A 2013 report, with a foreword from former President Clinton, put the

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For California in 2013, \$3.4 billion was spent by the federal government on transportation, and almost 10 times that much on military contracts.

— Doug Hall of the National Priorities Project

Instead, all we got was a shrug.

And the problem isn't limited to schools. When it comes to taking care of other public buildings, roads, bridges, ports and other infrastructure, the nation's grade from the American Society of Civil Engineers is a D-plus.

The society's 2013 report said that 32% of the nation's major roadways are in poor or mediocre condition. In California, which got a C-minus from the society in 2012, we paid an estimated \$17 billion in car repairs because of bad roads, and 2,769 of California's 24,995 bridges were rated deficient.

It doesn't take a genius to understand the economic benefits of maintaining infrastructure and the costs of letting everything fall apart. The movement of goods, household income and international trade are all impacted. But at the decision-making level, little priority is given to those national interests, even when public health is at risk.

Bad road conditions are a significant factor in an estimated one-third of the nation's 30,000-plus auto fatalities annually. And the recent Amtrak accident near Philadelphia that killed eight people and injured hundreds might have been prevented if an available safety feature were in place. The day after the crash, while families grieved, the conversation in Congress was not about funding the safety feature to save lives in the future; it was about how severely to shred Amtrak's budget.

When it comes to the military budget, though, there's very little skimping. And as the presidential candidates jockey for attention, you'll hear more calls to bolster national defense. Even libertarian-leaning Rand Paul has proposed boosting defense by stealing from education, housing and environmental protection.

It goes without saying that the U.S. has a unique role in the world and a great deal to protect. But ask yourself this:

Do we need to spend more money on our military (about \$600 billion this year) than the next seven countries combined?

Do we need 1.4 million active military personnel and 850,000 reserves when the enemy at the moment — ISIS — numbers in the low tens of thousands? If so, it seems there's something radically wrong with our strategy.

Should 55% of the federal government's discretionary spending go to the military and only 3% to transportation when the toll in American lives is far greater from failing infrastructure than from terrorism?

Does California need nearly as many active military bases (31, according to militarybases.com) as it has UC and state university campuses (33)? And does the state need more active duty military personnel (168,000, according to Governing magazine) than public elementary school teachers (139,000)?

If we started the national budgeting process from scratch, said Doug Hall of the National Priorities Project, wouldn't Americans want to make some changes?

"For California in 2013, \$3.4 billion was spent by the federal government on transportation, and almost 10 times that much on military contracts," Hall said.

I give full support to the goal of preventing acts of terrorism on the United States and its interests, especially given the barbarism of ISIS. I also support giving military personnel the best equipment they need when they're sent into harm's way, and the best care available when they come home.

But they've been marched off to unwinnable conflicts for unconvincing reasons, and there's little evidence to suggest that spending \$600 billion a year puts us any closer to a coherent strategy for making us safer or delivering stability to other parts of the world.

Iraq is in turmoil, Afghanistan isn't much better off, and one can reasonably ask whether each drone attack puts us closer to defeating terrorism or further from it, each strike drawing new and more fanatical recruits.

Imagine the impact we might see if a portion of defense spending each year were redirected to redeveloping this country, with a national workforce that rebuilds everything we've neglected for so many decades.

Imagine a country in which a bridge deteriorates and we remake it, a pothole grows and we fill it, a sidewalk ruptures and we repave it.

Imagine a country in which the tower above a school comes apart, and it takes three weeks to fix it instead of three years, and counting.

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