

Preface

Kay Coles James

This 2019 edition marks the fifth anniversary of The Heritage Foundation's *Index of U.S. Military Strength*. For the first time since the initial publication, rebounding budgets and returning end strength point to positive trends for U.S. national defense. However, the damage done over many years will not be undone overnight.

Congress and the President must stay the course.

As the world returns to an era of great-power competition, it is not enough simply to repair and replace aging ships, planes, and tanks. As the U.S. rested on the investments of past Administrations, our competitors and adversaries capitalized on the growing availability of advanced technologies—drawing from global commercial innovation, stealing the intellectual property of American businesses and institutions, and developing indigenous capabilities to counter long-held U.S. advantages in every domain of warfare.

The threats we face have grown increasingly sophisticated. According to Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, “we cannot expect success fighting tomorrow’s conflicts with yesterday’s weapons and equipment.”

U.S. military superiority has bred complacency among a population that has never known military defeat. Our country has largely taken for granted the peace and prosperity won through generations of investment and sacrifice, and we risk learning the hard way that continued superiority is not assured. Retaining a military advantage—particularly under the

current pace of technological development—requires an enduring commitment to consistent investment in our country’s security. Our history shows that a strong, capable military deters aggression and effectively enhances our ability to engage the world through diplomacy and trade.

The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 provided two years of welcome relief from the threat of sequestration. However, decades of continuing resolutions and budgetary uncertainty have left the military hostage to political whims, unable to plan and prepare for challenges on the horizon. Abraham Lincoln eloquently noted that “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.” With Lincoln’s warning in mind, perhaps we should realize that the greatest threat to U.S. military strength is the misconception that America can no longer afford military superiority.

Entitlement costs consume an increasing portion of the federal budget, and Congress continues to blow through debt ceilings. Too many in government have come to see defense as a trade-off rather than as the obligation and responsibility it truly is: a constitutionally mandated function of government to provide for the common defense.

The *Index* provides an enduring benchmark for Congress based on what history has shown is necessary to defend national interests. The force for which we advocate will not come cheap, but the costs of weakness and complacency are far greater. Secretary Mattis had a

message for Congress this year: “America *can* afford survival.” In order to ensure future generations the same peace and prosperity that we too often take for granted, Congress must continue to provide for a strong national defense—and remember that there are no permanent victories.

Kay Coles James, President
The Heritage Foundation
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