

By Robert Gates, U.S. Secretary of State for Defense

Consider an account of just one White House meeting in March 1956. President Eisenhower sat down with his top defense advisors to discuss the Pentagon budget. The meeting notes show Eisenhower becoming exasperated that "no one ever comes up to him and says 'let's get rid of something.'"

He then observed that it took the Army 50 years to get rid of horses. Ike questioned why the new Navy missiles cost so much more than the weapons they replaced and queried why the Army should have a 1500-mile ballistic missile program, since, in his words, "the Army does not have the equipment to see where they are hitting."

Eisenhower told his senior defense team that he wanted the Pentagon cut down to a "Spartan basis," lamenting that "people he had known all his life were asking for more and more." He went on to say: "I say the patriot today is the fellow who can do the job with less money."

Time and again, whenever Eisenhower was asked to fund something his response usually took the form of a question: where is the money going to come from, and what will the military cut in its place? The other question was priorities. In a meeting with defense officials earlier in his presidency, Eisenhower said he was troubled by the tendency to "pile program on program" to meet every possible contingency.

Eisenhower Library (Defense Spending)

Remarks as Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Abilene, KS, Saturday, May 08, 2010