I'll be seeing you

Most Americans agree that it is important to reduce waste in government spending. Most of us also feel that the United States must maintain an effective national defense. These are straightforward, sensible concepts, yet they are often ignored by the President, Congress, and the Pentagon when defense spending decisions are made. At this time when many civilian programs are being cut deeply to eliminate waste, it is especially crucial that we look for inefficiencies in military spending.

For years conservatives have criticized liberals—justifiably—for trying to solve social problems by throwing money at them. These same conservatives, however, are now trying to solve our defense problems by pumping more money into the Pentagon's black box.

Unfortunately, the Pentagon has not spent our money wisely. It has consistently decided to buy small numbers of complicated, costly, unreliable weapons systems rather than large numbers of simple, inexpensive, cost-effective systems. The new Abrams M1 tank is a good example of defense dollars poorly spent. It is true that the M1 was originally designed by Chrysler to meet a genuine defense need. For years the United States has relied on the threat of using nuclear weapons to deter Soviet conventional attack on Western Europe. This policy was, and is, dubious at best and irrational at worst. But the Soviet threat is real, and we must work to replace our nuclear deterrent with a Europe with a conventional one. A modernization of NATO's conventional forces—including tanks—is necessary to counter the Warsaw Pact's growing military superiority in that region. This is the main reason we are building the M1.

The M1 tank, however, will not improve NATO's defenses. Although it is a technological marvel, it is a soldier's nightmare. It was built to impress generals and politicians and make profits for its manufacturer, but it will not work in real battlefield conditions. The M1's design specifications originally required that 50 percent of the tanks be able to travel 400 miles without an overhaul, yet the M1 requires 3.1 hours of transmission or engine repair for every 107 miles it travels. In fact, this tank breaks down so often that only 45 percent of the total fleet of M1s were operationally capable at any one time during a recent test. This compares with an 85 percent figure for the M60, the tank the M1 is replacing. In addition, the M1 requires 3.1 hours of maintenance for every hour it is running. It gets just 1.9 miles per gallon, and it even has problems climbing hills steeper than 5 degrees. Also, the M1 usually can go only a few miles in snow, mud, or dusty conditions before its sophisticated turbine engines get clogged. It has a fancy electronic system, too, but that does not quite work either. And the M1 costs 2.7 million dollars per unit, three times as much as the more durable M60.

But in spite of the M1's severe drawbacks, the Army is already starting to deploy it. It plans to spend 2 billion dollars in fiscal 1983 to buy 776 more M1s, and a total of 46 billion dollars over the next twenty years for procurement, operation, and maintenance of the M1. That is a lot of money to spend on a technological toy that looks fancy but breaks down when one tries to use it. We must remember that the only good weapon is one that never needs to be fired because the enemy knows that it works.

Instead of pressuring ahead with the deployment of the M1, the Army should modernize the M60 tank and buy a larger quantity of M60s at an economical price. It should invest in cost-effective precision guided antitank missiles. It should spend more time and money training people to operate these weapons. Importantly, the Pentagon, Congress, and the President should judge the M1 and the alternatives on their merits.

The M1 tank is just one example of ineffectual defense spending. The DIVAD anti-aircraft weapon, the large nuclear ICBM, the strategic force, and the MX missile are a few other cases worth mentioning. And there are certainly many others. The conclusion we must draw is that more defense spending is no substitute for sensible defense spending. When our leaders realize that, we will all be more secure.