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Two views of the Soviets

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger is fond of saying that the Soviet defense budget determines the United States'. If so, it's disconcerting to learn that the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency can't agree on what Soviet military spending is.

Robert Gates, the CIA's deputy director for intelligence, told Congress' Joint Economic Committee that Soviet defense spending has become relatively stagnant since 1977, with outlays for military hardware increasing just 2 percent between 1982 and 1983. The DIA insists that Moscow's procurement spending has been rising between 5 and 8 percent a year, after adjusting for inflation. The latter assessment has been used to justify Mr. Weinberger's request for a 10 percent increase in American weapons procurement in the next budget.

A It's interesting that the CIA is sticking to its low estimate even though its director, William Casey, is known for preferring intelligence that supports the Reagan party line. It's noteworthy that the DIA represents a Pentagon

bureaucracy in which the rank and privileges of many a general and admiral depend on the size of procurement projects. Many Pentagon assessments of Soviet weapons capability are made by defense industry experts whose firms stand to benefit greatly from spending increases.

But, as Mr. Gates observed, what counts is not quibbling over dollar (or ruble) amounts but what the Soviets are getting for their money. Despite the stagnation, the Soviets have been producing "far more missiles, planes, warships, tanks and other weapons," he said.

The U.S. has been competing by building ever costlier but fewer and fewer weapons so laden with high technology that many observers fear they are too delicate to withstand the rigors of combat.

The question for Mr. Weinberger and especially Congress is which side is getting the most for its money and whether the Soviet threat is being met militarily as well as financially. On the battlefield, the size of ledger books is not going to count for much.