



INTERNATIONAL POLICY REPORT

Excerpt from “Something in the Air: ‘Isolationism,’ Defense Spending, and the US Public Mood”

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Twice in the past 40 years public opinion on defense spending shifted swiftly and dramatically from favoring reduced spending to favoring more. Both periods of change pivoted on bitter election campaigns. The first period was 1978-1982. The second was 1998-2001, as mentioned above. Comparing these pivot points with current conditions suggests that the public may soon be amenable to a rebound in defense spending – not in order to enable increased military activism but, paradoxically, *as an alternative to it*.

6. Pentagon Budget Pivot Points: 1978 and 1998

The impact of domestic politics on how the public views defense spending is evident in several periods of budget change – 1978-1981 and 1998-2000. Both share distinctive characteristics, some of which are also evident today. And in both cases, post-war declines in military spending ended and the Pentagon budget began to rebound.

The first period covers most of the Carter administration years. President Carter took office at the end of the post-Vietnam war drawdown in military personnel and budgets. Between 1968 and 1977, the Pentagon budget had declined by 30% in real terms, while the pool of active-component military personnel contracted by 38.5%. In early 1976 Gallup polling suggested that the public was supportive of this trend with 36% of respondents saying that America still spent “too much” on defense and only 22% saying it spent “too little.” Soon after, however, public sentiment began to move in the opposite direction as did Carter’s defense budgets.

The last Carter defense budget was 12.5% higher in real terms than the last Ford defense budget. This did not alter the trend in public sentiment, however. Gallup polling shows that “spend more” sentiment continued to increase, rising from 22% of respondents in 1976 to 51% in 1981 – a rare instance of absolute majority support for budget change.

The second period corresponds with President Clinton's second term, which marked the end of the post-Cold War drawdown. Between 1985 and 1997, the Pentagon budget had declined 35.6% in real terms, while active military personnel declined in number by 32%. The Clinton administration began to reverse the downward spending trend in early 1998 with its submission of the Fiscal Year 1999 budget. Between 1998 and 2001, the defense budget rose by almost 11% in real terms (not counting supplemental funding added by the Bush administration). Again, the rise in spending did not ease public sentiment for increased spending. Between 1998 and early 2001, the percentage of the public who thought we were spending too little on defense actually rose from 26% to 41%.

Five factors played a role in effecting a shift in public opinion during both periods:

First, the standing president seemed weakened politically by domestic developments – Carter, by persistent stagflation and the energy crisis; Clinton, by the Lewinsky scandal and his subsequent impeachment (Dec 1998).

Second, there were hotly contested and fiercely polarized election campaigns during which Democrats felt pressed to protect their right flank.

Third, partisan politics deeply inflected public debate of new security challenges abroad.

Fourth, military leaders began to warn insistently of a putative “hollowing” of the armed forces – meaning a sharp decline in combat readiness. Allegations of a weakened military and reports of trouble abroad served as reciprocal “frames,” each reinforcing the other.

Fifth, there was the appearance of a bipartisan consensus taking form among policy leaders in support of higher levels of defense spending, or greater assertiveness abroad, or both.

Bipartisan consensus or its appearance can have a powerful effect on public opinion, as trusted leaders on all sides seem to point in the same direction.¹¹⁷ Military leaders in particular have unique sway.¹¹⁸ During both periods of transition, public opinion seemed to follow the trend of a new defense budget consensus. However, as budgets rose and the presidency changed hands, the appearance of elite consensus evaporated and public opinion shifted back toward a “spend less” preference.¹¹⁹

Trouble at home, trouble abroad, trouble ahead

Especially prominent during the Carter years was the Iranian U.S. hostage-taking crisis (November 1979) and the failed "Eagle Claw" hostage rescue operation. Also relevant were the Nicaraguan revolution (1977-1979), the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (December 1979), and ongoing Soviet-Cuban intervention in Angola and the

Ethiopia-Somalia war. As putative challenges to U.S. or allied interests, none of these were as significant as the Vietnam and Korean wars, the Cuban missile crisis, or earlier Soviet interventions in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, they did accentuate Soviet-Cuban military activism and U.S. military failure in the face of a new regional adversary, Iran.

Clinton's second term saw no foreign policy debacles comparable to the lingering Iranian hostage crisis of the Carter years. However, there were growing concerns among experts and the public that the United States was facing new security challenges, notably: Al Qaeda and China.¹²⁰ There were three serious terrorist attacks on U.S. personnel and assets abroad between 1996 and 2000, and at least two of these were the work of bin Laden.¹²¹ Concerns also focused on Chinese military developments after the 1995-1996 Taiwan Straits crisis. By 1998, U.S. policymakers and analysts were routinely treating China as a potential regional competitor to the United States.¹²² A final irritant throughout Clinton's second term was Saddam Hussein who, despite a short intense U.S. bombing campaign in 1998, seemed to be effectively resisting arms control efforts while the international coalition supporting sanctions slowly frayed.

Challenged from the right, Democratic administrations took a hawkish turn during both periods. Few Republicans were as hawkish as Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, especially after 1978 as he pushed for activation of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (1980) and formulated the "Carter Doctrine" (which designated the Persian Gulf as an area of vital interest to be protected "by any means necessary").¹²³ The Carter Administration also took the controversial step of shifting America's nuclear posture further along to a warfighting stance.¹²⁴

The Clinton administration took a bellicose turn in 1998-1999, conducting three significant combat operations over an eight month period beginning in August 1998: Operations Infinite Reach (Sudan and Afghanistan), Desert Fox (Iraq), and Allied Force (former Yugoslavia). (August 1998 through February 1999 also was a pivotal period in the Lewinsky scandal, encompassing Clinton's grand jury testimony and impeachment.)

The Clinton administration faced incessant complaints about overusing and misusing the armed forces abroad. Although Clinton did conduct significant contingency operations in eight countries during his two terms, the overall number of troop/days that military personnel spent deployed in such operations was less than 15% the average during the subsequent Bush administration.¹²⁵ More to the point was the character of some of the Clinton initiatives; They were peace and humanitarian operations, which some military and congressional leaders thought impaired military readiness and distracted the armed forces from their principal role.¹²⁶ Some Senators and Congress members (mostly Republicans) also complained that these operations suffered from poorly defined or implausible objectives and did not clearly serve the national interest. This was part of a more general conservative opposition to the administration's multilateralism and institutionalism. Neoliberal and neoconservative interventionists responded by playing the "isolationism" card, helping to establish a consensus that equated restraint with isolationism.¹²⁷

There were some indications during Clinton's second term that America's armed forces were not yet well-adapted to the new challenges facing America. Attempts to interdict Al Qaeda leadership with cruise missile attacks in 1998 failed. And Operation Allied Force (1999), which aimed to compel Yugoslav withdrawal from Kosovo province, took longer than expected. Although the operation achieved its goals, the U.S. military effort was deemed "disjointed." The U.S. Army in particular had a hard time playing a timely, meaningful role.¹²⁸ None of these shortfalls implied the need for a dramatic increase in defense spending.¹²⁹ Nonetheless, they were worthy of concern, received a great deal of media attention, and provided grist for partisan mills.

Mollifying the Chiefs and biasing public debate

Military leaders enjoy unique political leverage in the United States in large part due to the status of the institutions they lead. The U.S. armed forces routinely register as the most trusted of American institutions, out-polling even religious institutions.¹³⁰ Although military leaders employ this leverage gingerly, the domestic problems faced by both the Carter and Clinton administrations gave military leaders greater latitude to resist administration narratives. Indeed, during Clinton administration's final years the Joint Chiefs were in virtual revolt.¹³¹

The centerpiece of Pentagon dissatisfaction during both periods of transition was the putative "hollowing" of the armed forces, presumably due to budget reductions.¹³² In congressional testimony, the Joint Chiefs' support for administration budgets became faint and *pro forma*, while they instead emphasized increased risk and the prospective erosion of military capabilities over time. The effect of their congressional testimony was to inflame the issue.

In retrospect, readiness problems were not nearly as serious as military leaders claimed – and certainly not during the Clinton years.¹³³ Nor were they principally the consequence of budget reductions. While gross levels of Pentagon spending had declined in the decade before readiness issues became news, military expenditures per active-duty person in uniform actually grew in real terms over previous years during both the Carter and Clinton administrations.¹³⁴ This was partly because reductions in gross spending were matched by reductions in force size. For instance, operations and maintenance spending per active-duty troop in 1998 was 30% higher than in 1985, corrected for inflation. Still, the allegations, buttressed by authoritative military officials, were politically potent.

During both transition periods, Democratic and Republican leaders responded to Pentagon assertiveness by enacting or proposing hikes in spending (while disagreeing about the appropriate amount). Thus, both the Reagan- and G.W. Bush-era military buildups actually began during the previous administrations – three or four years before the presidency changed hands. Democrats may have hoped to quell Pentagon protests and protect their right flank, but accommodation also served to validate "hollow force" claims and contribute to upward pressure on the budget.

The 2000 election campaign featured Democratic and Republican candidates in a bidding war over boosting defense spending, which by June 2000 had already grown nearly 13% above its 1997 low point in real terms.¹³⁵ Neither linked the prospect of increased defense spending to an increase in overseas activism, however. Indeed, they matched their spending competition with dueling rhetoric about the need for America to practice humility abroad.¹³⁶ This accorded with public sentiment favoring a strong but reserved America, and it played on the prospect of increasing defense spending as an alternative to activism, rather than an enabler of it.

Second thoughts on defense spending

As noted above, the surge in support for defense spending was short-lived during both periods:

- By late 1982 public sentiment had returned to Vietnam syndrome levels with 16% of the population saying America was spending “too little” and 41% saying that it was spending too much.
- Between February 2001 and February 2004, the proportion of Gallup respondents wanting increased spending dropped from 41% to 22%, while the proportion wanting less increased from 19% to 31%.

These were not simply judgments against the rise in spending levels. Both periods of remission were marked by rising deficits and economic troubles.¹³⁷ The change in public mood also involved emerging dissatisfaction with changes in U.S. military posture. In the case of the Reagan administration, the change was especially rapid.

Reagan took office in 1981 with the public worried about American weakness abroad and expressing 51% support for increased Pentagon spending. Only 15% thought the nation was already spending too much. Two years later, the defense budget had grown by 30%. However, the economy had entered a recessionary cycle and public concern grew about what seemed a rash and bellicose (or “war seeking”) turn in U.S. policy.¹³⁸ As a result, public sentiment about defense spending flipped, Reagan's popularity rating dropped from 51% to 43%, and Republicans lost 26 House seats in the 1982 mid-term election.

7. The Obama Years: A Captive Presidency

Pentagon spending: Going along to get along

President Obama has avoided the type of difficulties described above – at least until recently. Unlike Carter, he did not begin his presidency at the end of a period of reductions in the military's size and budget – quite the opposite. And, unlike Clinton, he did not himself implement reductions during his first years in office. Despite the nation's economic and fiscal crisis, Obama's first four Pentagon budgets (adjusted for inflation)

provided total funding equal to that provided in Bush's last four – approximately \$2.8 trillion in each case.¹³⁹

While both the Carter and Clinton administrations found themselves at logger-heads with the Pentagon brass over a variety of issues, President Obama has proved more accommodating – for instance, by acceding to the Afghanistan troop surge.¹⁴⁰ More significant was his response to the service chiefs' dissatisfaction with his first ten-year spending plan (offered early in 2009). His next year's plan (Fiscal Year 2011) boosted the ten-year Pentagon base budget by five percent. It is against this boosted level that subsequent DoD savings plans were measured.

Although contention over budgeting grew intense beginning in 2011, this was part of the larger struggle to reduce federal debt, deficits, and spending. In practical terms, defense spending decisions were bound by the bipartisan Budget Control Act of 2011, which dictated a rollback. In this context, the Obama administration proffered plans that would bring the Pentagon budget more in line with BCA discretionary spending caps, while also arguing strenuously against deeper "sequestration" cuts. The administration successfully cast the prospect of such cuts as a problem whose source was Congressional gridlock.¹⁴¹

Obama's secretaries of defense, chairmen of the JCS, and service chiefs were free to pressure Congress to avert sequestration and lift the caps on discretionary spending – a goal shared by the President. Pentagon leaders spared no hyperbole in opposing measures that would reduce the peacetime defense budget much below \$520 billion.¹⁴² To mitigate DoD's concerns, the administration allowed the migration of costs from the base DoD budget to the Overseas Contingency account, which was not capped by the BCA. And, in 2014, the President proposed an "Opportunity, Growth and Security Initiative" that, if offset by tax increases and mandatory spending cuts, would give the Pentagon an additional \$26 billion for the year.¹⁴³

In sum, from the beginning of his administration, President Obama took an accommodating stance on Pentagon funding – one that his Democratic predecessors had been grudgingly compelled to assume. In this way, he averted an openly contentious relationship with America's most prestigious institution.

The new look in military activism: lighter and wider

Over the course of his presidency, President Obama has restored and renovated the neoliberal version of the Primacy strategy.¹⁴⁴ This puts greater emphasis on multilateral cooperation and diplomacy than does the neoconservative variety.¹⁴⁵ Hawkish voices (including some in the Pentagon) derided Obama's withdrawal from Iraq, but it had been decided by Iraq's failure to renew the US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement. And, like the drawdown in Afghanistan, it accorded with public opinion.

In some ways, Obama has charted a course part way between those of the Clinton and Bush administrations. In others, he has exceeded both. The so-called “long war against violent extremism” proceeds apace, now as a war that dare not speak its name. However, the administration has stepped away from large-scale protracted military deployments and instead put emphasis on lower-visibility operations and supporting roles for U.S. forces. These include drone and combat aircraft strikes – over 400 drone strikes since Obama took office – covert operations, arms transfers, logistical and intelligence support, training, and other forms of security assistance. Borrowing on the concept of the “non-integrating gap” developed by Thomas Barnett, the Obama strategy is best described as involving a protracted, global, low-intensity campaign against militant or violent non-integrating regimes, movements, and organizations.¹⁴⁶

U.S. military activism is less intensive and focused today than during the Bush years but more expansive, including new or increased attention to Libya, Syria, Yemen, Pakistan, Somali, and several other African nations. The deployment of special operations forces – now active in more than 100 nations – has expanded significantly as have the number of security cooperation arrangements, which now involve more than 150 nations.¹⁴⁷ The administration’s “Asia pivot” (better described as part of an Asia-Africa “spread”) signals a more consistent and energetic effort to counter-balance and contain Chinese power. Something similar now seems on the agenda for Russia.

The growing scope of U.S. military activism clearly runs counter to the secular trend in public opinion. However, the lower-visibility, light-footprint methods favored by the Obama administration mitigates the tension between public preference and government practice. For instance, when U.S. polls describe overseas drone strikes as attacks on suspected foreign terrorists, between 50% and 80% of respondents typically voice approval.¹⁴⁸ This may all seem too diffuse and deliberate from a neoconservative perspective, but it could offer the best hope of sustaining a proactive military strategy given fiscal austerity and the public mood.

8. Transition Point 2016?

Since 2012, the factors associated with past rebounds in support for bigger defense budgets have again become prominent, beginning with a distinct decline in the President’s popularity.¹⁴⁹ The United States is entering a period of intense electoral campaigning that will span 2014-2016. Both the Senate and the Presidency are up for grabs. This favors partisan pyrotechnics. Democratic candidates will focus on protecting their right flanks, per usual. And media and expert discourse will move in a more hawkish direction. Already the leading Democratic contender for the presidency is positioning herself to the right of the Obama administration on recent foreign policy issues.¹⁵⁰

Thinking inside the box

In several ways, the policy compromises of the Obama administration delimit the current debate, curtailing the prospects for reform. First, the President's accommodation with the Pentagon on spending has created the appearance of bipartisan leadership accord on the need for baseline spending to significantly exceed one-half trillion dollars annually. For more than three years civilian and military leaders at the Pentagon have been adamant in warning that dipping below this amount by even as little as 5% might have catastrophic consequences. This has primed policy discourse to respond to "hollow force" claims, which are now fully deployed.¹⁵¹ And it has virtually ensured that Democratic and Republican candidates in 2016 will vie in bidding up Pentagon spending (as was the case in 2000).

Judging from recent White House and Republican proposals for Pentagon spending, Presidential candidates in 2016 will probably advocate future baseline Pentagon budgets exceeding \$600 billion (then-year dollars). This assumes modest GDP growth, lower federal deficits, and modification of the BCA – all of which are likely. Adjusted for inflation, this would represent a greater than 12% increase over current levels and a budget 50% larger than in 2000-2001.

Obama's perpetuation of the primacy strategy also has locked policy discourse in a neoliberal versus neoconservative box. The primacy approach overvalues and overplays America's "sole military superpower" status, seeing security problems everywhere as a challenge to U.S. leadership. It privileges military responses of one sort or the other and focuses debate on the calibration of military action: What type? How much? How long? Discounted by primacists is the possibility that some problems admit only cooperative solutions and that the utility of military or confrontational approaches is limited. Thus, faced with difficult challenges – as in Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine – the primacy approach typically favors escalation. And it legitimates charges of "weakness" should policymakers or the public seek more deliberate or restrained approaches. So it is not surprising that Second World War issue frames are now fully in play – casting Assad and Putin as Hitler, warning against a replay of Munich-like appeasement, and tarring non-interventionary sentiment as isolationist.¹⁵² "Hollow force" claims are also being linked by military leaders to instability abroad.¹⁵³

Will fear compel increased public support for deeper, more energetic intervention, as Walter Russell Meads predicts? Will it compel a rebound in support for defense spending? Despite the hawkish turn in policy discourse, the American public has mostly resisted a rebound in activism and spending.¹⁵⁴ As argued in the introduction, popular opinion on striking ISIS may seem a reversion to interventionism, but it is not.

The ISIS digression

The coverage, debate, and policy regarding ISIS has been driven substantially by domestic partisan politics and by news frenzy. The impact of these illustrates the susceptibility of public opinion to shaping by media and political dynamics. The polling blip on ISIS also shows how “mission creep” and “opinion creep” go hand-in-hand, each pushing the other forward. In the ISIS case, limited U.S. combat action based on a popular humanitarian goal – rescuing the entrapped Yazidi minority – prompted ISIS retaliation on hostage Americans. This dramatically altered U.S. popular assessments of the situation, feeding the partisan mill and creating pressure for both vertical and horizontal escalation. As the administration escalated its response, its domestic political opponents simply revised their criteria of adequacy upward. For President Obama, political credit and gain depends on achieving escalation dominance – not over ISIS (that already exists) but over his domestic opponents. This is a partisan dynamic that can lead the nation deep into costly, unproductive choices.¹⁵⁵ These eventually sober public opinion, but not necessarily before the next election.

Still, historical precedent suggests that the U.S. public will not soon support a return to big protracted military operations abroad – and certainly not the commitment of ground troops. It is worth recalling that Americans’ reluctance to take on major new contingency operations after Vietnam was not truly tested and resolved until the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War – 15 years after the United States exited Vietnam.

Defending with dollars

Public support for a big rebound in Pentagon spending is a more complicated issue. A boost in spending could find support as an acceptable assertion of strength – *one that does not necessarily entail increased military activism abroad*. Formally, it is consistent with either a “Fortress America” or “Arsenal of Democracy” vision of security. This outcome would accord with the historical precedents set in 1978-1981 and 1998-2000, when Americans favored increased spending but not with a view toward military adventurism.

Weighing against public acceptance of higher defense spending is America’s “new normal” economic circumstance. Although U.S. GDP is slowly recovering, the improvement in the economic circumstances of most Americans has lagged behind.¹⁵⁶

- U.S. GDP has grown 5% in real terms since 2011. By contrast, median household income grew only about 2.5% during the same period. It remains a good 5% below the pre-recession level, which itself is lower than the level in 2000.
- Unemployment was 6.6% in January 2014. This is much better than the recession high-point of 10%, but significantly short of the pre-recession level of 4.6%.

Still, median household income may reach its pre-recession levels by 2017, making a rise in defense spending more saleable. Much depends on the degree of uniformity among opinion leaders in espousing hawkish and alarmist views on international events and U.S. national defenses.¹⁵⁷

9. Conclusion

This much is certain: A flexing of the Pentagon's budget muscles will not redress the problems that vex U.S. security policy. Nor will it heal the recurring gap between official policy and majority opinion. Contrary to public preferences, increased Pentagon spending will enable increased military activism. It also will reduce the pressure on the Pentagon to reform how it uses its prodigious resources. For these reasons, any increase in public support for a rebound in the defense budget will probably be short-lived, as was the case 10- and 30-years ago.

The current trend in official policy represents a missed opportunity. Economic and strategic realities both argue for a thorough reset of U.S. security policy. Recent polling suggests that the American public is ready to consider change. And policy alternatives are available for consideration.¹⁵⁸ What is lacking is positive leadership. An optimistic sign is the emergence since 2011 of bipartisan Congressional and NGO cooperation to restrain defense spending, based mostly on fiscal concerns.¹⁵⁹ This may provide the soil in which a concerted effort to reset security policy can germinate.

A more fundamental concern is the challenge to democratic governance implied by the gap between official security policy and the strategic preferences of most Americans. It is not surprising that there are knowledge gaps between the general public and those who focus professionally on security issues and instruments. Such gaps can be mended through openness and critical public discourse. More intractable are gaps due to the subsumption of public policy by institutional, commercial, and political interests. Again, critical public discourse can serve as a corrective. But special interests work to distort discourse as surely as they distort policy.

The integrity of public debate on security issues minimally requires that opinion leaders put down those tropes, metaphors, and framing devices that appeal to public fear and uncertainty. This includes facile allusions to the threats and failures of the 1930s and 1940s: Hitler, Munich, Pearl Harbor, and isolationism.¹⁶⁰ Such allusions should uniformly face a long hard climb to credibility. The same holds true for most "hollow force" claims made on behalf of America's half-trillion dollar military. If the Pentagon cannot deliver reasonable levels of military security while absorbing more money than the Cold War average then we should look first to failures of defense stewardship or strategy – or both.

Notes

- 117.** Berinsky, "Assuming the Costs of War," op. cit.
- 118.** Golby, et. al., "Listening to the Generals," op. cit.
- 119.** During the Reagan years, "spend less" sentiment out-poll "spend more" beginning in 1982. During the GW Bush presidency, "spend less" sentiment out-poll "spend more" beginning in Feb 2003.
- 120.** Robert Kagan, "World of Problems," Washington Post, 10 Apr 2000, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2000/04/10/world-of-problems/4w1q?reloadFlag=1>
- 121.** These were the 25 June 1996 truck bomb attack on the Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia; The 7 Aug 1998 truck bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; and, The 12 Oct 2000 attack on U.S. Navy destroyer USS Cole in Yemen.
- 122.** 1990s concern about China as a potential regional competitor:
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125. Carl Conetta, Charles Knight, and Melissa Murphy, "Is the Iraq war sapping America's military power? Cautionary data and perspectives," Project on Defense Alternatives, 22 Oct 2004, available at <http://comw.org/pda/is-the-iraq-war-sapping-americas-military-power-cautionary-data-and-perspectives/> See especially the graph, "A Measure of Stress to Active Component Army Personnel 1994-2004."

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129. The surge in spending after 1981 did produce a military capable of quickly compelling Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait in 1991, although this goal figured not at all in the original impetus to boost spending and only a portion of the added funds were relevant to that war. By contrast, additional spending after 1998 did nothing to protect America from the 11 Sep 2001 attacks. Nor did it encourage a sensible prioritization among security objectives. As the United States entered the 21st century, defense leaders mistakenly de-emphasized the Al Qaeda threat while over-emphasizing China and Iraq. Finally, additional spending did not prepare America to effectively fight the types of wars into which national security leaders chose to stumble after 2001. In short, spending more on defense is no guarantee of true preparedness.

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