



Experts Letter on Defense Spending to the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform 18 November 2010

Dear Co-chairman Bowles and Co-chairman Simpson:

We are writing to you as experts in national security and defense economics to convey our views on the national security implications of the Commission's work and especially the need for achieving responsible reductions in military spending. In this regard, we appreciate the initiative you have taken in your 10 November 2010 draft proposal to the Commission. It begins a necessary process of serious reflection, debate, and action.

The vitality of our economy is the cornerstone of our nation's strength. We share the Commission's desire to bring our financial house into order. Doing so is not merely a question of economics. Reducing the national debt is also a national security imperative.

To date, the Obama administration has exempted the Defense Department from any budget reductions. This is short-sighted: It makes it more difficult to accomplish the task of restoring our economic strength, which is the underpinning of our military power.

As the rest of the nation labors to reduce its debt burden, the current plan is to boost the base DOD budget by 10 percent in real terms over the next decade. This would come on top of the nearly 52 percent real increase in base military spending since 1998. (When war costs are included the increase has been much greater: 95 percent.)

We appreciate Secretary Gates' efforts to reform the Pentagon's business and acquisition practices. However, even if his reforms fulfill their promise, the current plan does not translate them into budgetary savings that contribute to solving our deficit problem. Their explicit aim is to free funds for other uses inside the Pentagon. This is not good enough.

Granting defense a special dispensation puts at risk the entire deficit reduction effort. Defense spending today constitutes over 55 percent of discretionary spending and 23 percent of the federal budget. An exemption for defense not only undermines the

broader call for fiscal responsibility, but also makes overall budget restraint much harder as a practical economic and political matter.

We need not put our economic power at risk in this way. Today the United States possesses a wide margin of global military superiority. The defense budget can bear significant reduction without compromising our essential security.

We recognize that larger military adversaries may rise to face us in the future. But the best hedge against this possibility is vigilance and a vibrant economy supporting a military able to adapt to new challenges as they emerge.

We can achieve greater defense economy today in several ways, all of which we urge you to consider seriously. We need to be more realistic in the goals we set for our armed forces and more selective in our choices regarding their use abroad. We should focus our military on core security goals and on those current and emerging threats that most directly affect us.

We also need to be more judicious in our choice of security instruments when dealing with international challenges. Our armed forces are a uniquely expensive asset and for some tasks no other instrument will do. For many challenges, however, the military is not the most cost-effective choice. We can achieve greater efficiency today without diminishing our security by better discriminating between vital, desirable, and unnecessary military missions and capabilities.

There is a variety of specific options that would produce savings, some of which we describe below. The important point, however, is a firm commitment to seek savings through a reassessment of our defense strategy, our global posture, and our means of producing and managing military power.

- Since the end of the Cold War, we have required our military to prepare for and conduct more types of missions in more places around the world. The Pentagon's task list now includes not only preventive war, regime change, and nation building, but also vague efforts to "shape the strategic environment" and stem the emergence of threats. It is time to prune some of these missions and restore an emphasis on defense and deterrence.
- U.S. combat power dramatically exceeds that of any plausible combination of conventional adversaries. To cite just one example, Secretary Gates has observed that the U.S. Navy is today as capable as the next 13 navies combined, most of which are operated by our allies. We can safely save by trimming our current margin of superiority.

- America's permanent peacetime military presence abroad is largely a legacy of the Cold War. It can be reduced without undermining the essential security of the United States or its allies.
- The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have revealed the limits of military power. Avoiding these types of operation globally would allow us to roll back the recent increase in the size of our Army and Marine Corps.
- The Pentagon's acquisition process has repeatedly failed, routinely delivering weapons and equipment late, over cost, and less capable than promised. Some of the most expensive systems correspond to threats that are least prominent today and unlikely to regain prominence soon. In these cases, savings can be safely realized by cancelling, delaying, or reducing procurement or by seeking less costly alternatives.
- Recent efforts to reform Defense Department financial management and acquisition practices must be strengthened. And we must impose budget discipline to trim service redundancies and streamline command, support systems, and infrastructure.

Change along these lines is bound to be controversial. Budget reductions are never easy - no less for defense than in any area of government. However, fiscal realities call on us to strike a new balance between investing in military power and attending to the fundamentals of national strength on which our true power rests. We can achieve safe savings in defense if we are willing to rethink how we produce military power and how, why, and where we put it to use.

Sincerely,

Gordon Adams, American University

Robert Art, Brandeis University

Deborah Avant, University of California, Irvine

Andrew Bacevich, Boston University

Richard Betts, Columbia University

Linda Bilmes, Kennedy School, Harvard University

Steven Clemons, New America Foundation

Joshua Cohen, Stanford University and *Boston Review*

Carl Conetta, Project on Defense Alternatives

Owen R. Cote Jr., Security Studies Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Michael Desch, University of Notre Dame

Matthew Evangelista, Cornell University

Benjamin H. Friedman, Cato Institute
Lt. Gen. (USA, Ret.) Robert G. Gard, Jr., Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation
David Gold, Graduate Program in International Affairs, The New School
William Hartung, Arms and Security Initiative, New America Foundation
David Hendrickson, Colorado College
Michael Intriligator, UCLA and Milken Institute
Robert Jervis, Columbia University
Sean Kay, Ohio Wesleyan University
Elizabeth Kier, University of Washington
Charles Knight, Project on Defense Alternatives
Lawrence Korb, Center for American Progress
Peter Krogh, Georgetown University
Richard Ned Lebow, Dartmouth College
Walter LaFeber, Cornell University
Col. (USA, Ret.) Douglas Macgregor
Scott McConnell, *The American Conservative*
John Mearsheimer, University of Chicago
Steven Metz, national security analyst and writer
Steven Miller, Kennedy School, Harvard University and *International Security*
Janne Nolan, American Security Project
Robert Paarlberg, Wellesley College and Harvard University
Paul Pillar, Georgetown University
Barry Posen, Security Studies Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Christopher Preble, Cato Institute
Daryl Press, Dartmouth College
Jeffrey Record, defense policy analyst and author
David Rieff, author
Thomas Schelling, University of Maryland
Jack Snyder, Columbia University
J. Ann Tickner, University of Southern California
Robert Tucker, Johns Hopkins University
Stephen Van Evera, Security Studies Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Stephen Walt, Harvard University
Kenneth Waltz, Columbia University
Cindy Williams, Security Studies Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Daniel Wirls, University of California, Santa Cruz

◆ **This letter reflects the opinions of the individual signatories.** ◆
Institutions are listed for identification purposes only.