

Talking Sense About Defense

Editorial Commentary on *Debt, Deficits, and Defense*

MR. GATES MAKES A START

New York Times editorial, 14 August 2010

Defense Secretary Robert Gates has pledged to restrain military spending. Predictably, members of Congress, industry lobbyists and military commanders are all pushing back. This is a battle well worth fighting. If anything, he needs to be even more ambitious.

The Pentagon's budget has doubled in the last decade to nearly \$550 billion, not including the extra \$159 billion this year to pay for two wars. There is no way to address the nation's deep fiscal crisis or its security threats without a more rational approach to defense procurement and tough choices on personnel policies.

Mr. Gates has already taken some sound preliminary steps. He has canceled or cut back several dozen unneeded weapons programs, a projected long-term savings of \$330 billion, and ordered the military services and Pentagon agencies to find \$100 billion in administrative cuts and efficiencies over the next five years.

His latest proposed savings, outlined last week, are modest – despite the political fire they are drawing. He is calling for closing the Joint Forces Command in Norfolk, Va. (it allocates forces around the world and encourages the services to work together on the battlefield). That could mean the loss of 2,800 jobs for military and civilian workers supported by 3,000 private contractors at an annual savings of \$240 million. Mr. Gates also proposed a 30 percent cut over three years on contractors who provide support services to the military, placed a freeze on the number of workers in his office, and said he planned to eliminate at least 50 posts for generals and admirals and 150 for senior civilians, and shut down two Pentagon agencies that employ 550 more people.

Far more important, and politically difficult, is Mr. Gates's vow to rein in military health care spending: the annual bill rose from \$19 billion to \$50 billion over the last decade. Active-duty members of the military rightly do not pay for care. Annual premiums for retirees, \$460 per family, have not risen in 15 years and must be increased.

A task force commissioned by Rep. Barney Frank and a bipartisan group of colleagues estimates that raising retiree premiums (it referenced an earlier study that talked about gradually increasing them to about \$1,100 a family, still far below commercial rates), plus charging an enrollment fee for a program that provides a wraparound policy for Medicare-eligible retirees, could save \$6 billion annually.

Mr. Gates, a savvy Washington insider, is trying to preempt even deeper cuts. He still wants to ensure an annual spending increase 1 percent over inflation for the foreseeable future. That is still too much.

He needs to jettison more poorly performing, redundant or anachronistic weapons systems, including nuclear weapons. Once the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, the administration must look at trimming troop strength, beginning with the Navy and the Air Force.

Since the 9/11 attacks, Congress has given the Pentagon pretty much everything it has requested, with few questions asked. So it is good news that some members are now looking more critically at the Pentagon budget. In its recent report, Mr. Frank's task force – the Sustainable Defense Task Force – concluded that the Pentagon could cut \$960 billion between 2011 and 2020 without harming essential security. The president's deficit commission must do the same. The military budget is 20 percent of federal spending and 50 percent of discretionary spending. There is no way to address the deficit without deeper cuts in defense spending.

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MILITARY CAN TAKE CUTS

Philadelphia Inquirer editorial, 11 August 2010

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates' plan to curb military spending is a needed step, but Congress should work on cutting the Pentagon's budget even further.

Gates on Monday laid out a specific proposal to trim defense spending by \$100 billion over the next five years. Among the cuts, he'd eliminate a military command in Norfolk, Va., and

shrink the number of private contractors who are paid by the Pentagon.

Saving \$100 billion is nothing to shrug at. And Gates should get credit for trying to reduce administrative costs without harming the nation's fighting ability.

But his proposals represent a small dent in defense spending, which has soared in the past decade. Even with Gates' proposed reductions, overall military spending would rise an average of 1 percent per year above inflation.

Given the country's massive deficits, defense should be targeted for overall reductions instead of slower growth. The long-term budget picture is gloomy, and sacrifice will be needed from every corner of the government's operations.

President Obama hasn't seen it that way, yet. He's asked Congress to boost defense spending next year, from \$535 billion to \$549 billion. And that staggering sum doesn't include the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which bring the total to \$708 billion – about 6 percent more than the highest spending levels under former President George W. Bush.

In the past decade, defense spending has increased an average of 7 percent annually above inflation. Much of that increase is due to the two wars that followed the 9/11 attacks, but there also has been growth in bureaucracy. For example, the defense secretary's office alone has added about 1,000 employees in the past 10 years, an increase of about 50 percent.

Cutting the military budget means cutting jobs, which will be difficult even for a Pentagon chief with Gates' credibility. Already this week, elected officials in Virginia are coming out against these proposed reductions.

Too often, lawmakers try to save defense programs in their

own backyards when even the military doesn't want them. Gates has been waging this battle valiantly under Republican and Democratic administrations.

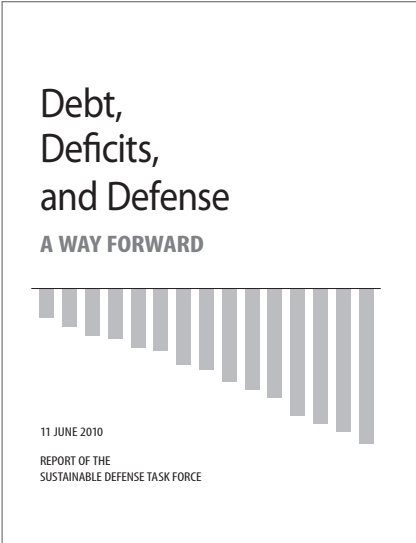
Gates is trying to control military spending by striking first with his proposed cuts. Otherwise, he fears that deficits and the ongoing withdrawal of troops from Iraq will spur some Democratic lawmakers to make deeper cuts without the same level of care that Gates has taken.

TIME TO GET TOUGH ON DEFENSE SPENDING

Katrina vanden Heuvel, *Washington Post*, 22 June 2010

With the fixation on shrinking the budget deficit, why is over \$700 billion in annual defense spending almost always off-limits for discussion? The mainstream media rarely explore possible cuts in the nation's largest discretionary spending item, and most politicians refuse to even consider the issue.

That's why the bipartisan Sustainable Defense Task Force's June 11 report recommending over \$1 trillion in Pentagon cuts over the next 10 years is an indication that some sanity might arrive inside the Beltway. Convened by Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) – who raised this issue in an early-2009 op-ed for *The Nation* – along with Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden (Ore.) and Republican Reps. Ron Paul (Texas) and Walter Jones (N.C.), the task force not only sheds light on how to find needed revenues but also suggests a new national security framework



Debt, Deficits, and Defense

A WAY FORWARD

11 JUNE 2010

REPORT OF THE
SUSTAINABLE DEFENSE TASK FORCE

Debt, Deficits, and Defense: A Way Forward

Sustainable Defense Task Force

“The Sustainable Defense Task Force concluded that the Pentagon could cut \$960 billion between 2011 and 2020. . . . The president's deficit commission must do the same.”

– *New York Times* editorial, 14 August 2010

Full report: <http://www.comw.org/pda/fulltext/1006SDTFreport.pdf>

Executive summary: <http://www.comw.org/pda/fulltext/SDTFreportexsum.pdf>

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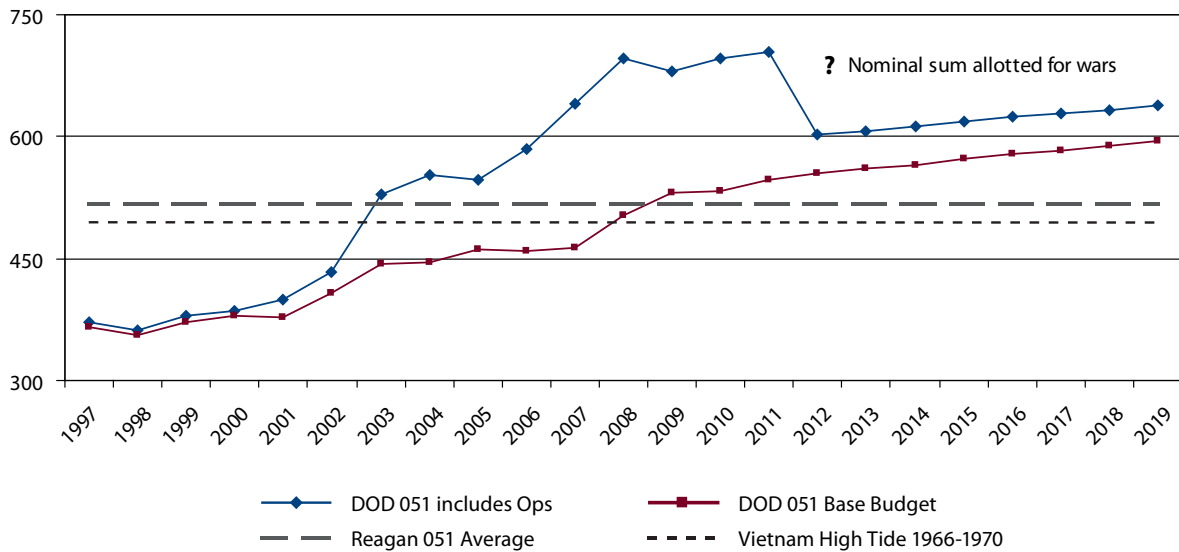
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DoD Budget Authority 1997-2019

with and without Contingency Operations (billions 2010 USD)



Source: DoD & Office of Management and the Budget

Project on Defense Alternatives

for the 21st century. Some of the report’s big-ticket items for savings over a 10-year period include \$113 billion by reducing the U.S. nuclear arsenal; \$200 billion by reducing U.S. military presence abroad and total uniformed military personnel; \$138 billion by replacing unworkable, costly weapons systems with better alternatives; and \$100 billion by cutting unnecessary command, support and infrastructure funding.

But, the report argues, “significant savings” may depend on rethinking “our national security commitments and goals to ensure they focus clearly on what concerns us the most.” It goes on to describe “a strategy of restraint – one that reacts to danger rather than going out in search of it. . . . We need not stick around in foreign lands often. “Our military budget should be sized to defend us. For this end, we do not need to spend \$700 billion a year – or anything close. We can be safe for much less, provided that we capitalize on our geopolitical fortune. Our principal enemy, al-Qaeda, has no army, no air force, and no navy. . . . The hunt for anti-American terrorists is mostly an intelligence and policing task.”

A reorientation of security policy will not come easily in light of what Nation reporter Ari Berman calls “the strategic class” – the hawkish Democratic foreign policy advisers, the neocons, the think-tank specialists and pundits who abound in Washington and crowd out alternative policies and arguments. Lobbyists for defense contractors with hundreds of billions of dollars at stake are also formidable opponents to change.

This narrowing of options is abetted by a mainstream media that offer little exposure to new security ideas – generated by groups left, right and center, inside and outside of Washington – that challenge the status quo. Indeed, few in the media have covered the task force’s report. Add to that mix the oft-used argument – especially potent in an economy with double-digit unemployment – that defense cuts are a jobs killer, and the prospect for the broader debate Americans need and deserve are dim. Defense spending, however, is one of the worst ways to create jobs per dollar spent. It makes far more sense to cut an increasingly bloated Pentagon budget than to reduce much-needed investment in jobs, clean energy, transportation and support for state and local governments, all of which stimulate the economy much more efficiently and contribute more to our national recovery.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates has tried to eliminate a few weapons programs. But, so far, he has mostly moved money from one weapons program to another. Making significant cuts in defense spending will demand more than just trimming unnecessary weapons programs and eliminating Pentagon waste and fraud. It will require rethinking our role in the world, as the task force report suggests. Is America Globocop or responsible Republic? As Globocop, we have spent over \$1 trillion on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq alone. Isn’t it time we had an honest and open debate on that question?

Katrina vanden Heuvel is editor and publisher of the Nation and writes a weekly column for The Post.

MILITARY MONEY PIT

Joshua Green, *Boston Globe*, 17 June 2010

Brooding over the deficit is Washington's civil religion, and as the budget gap exploded over the last two years, we've witnessed a revival. From the Tea Party to the White House, the deficit is a driving concern. Fear of adding to it has thwarted Democratic efforts at another stimulus. Anger over it could determine who controls Congress. No force in politics is more powerful.

So it's odd that the largest category of discretionary spending has largely escaped scrutiny: military spending. In January, when President Obama proposed a three-year freeze in discretionary spending, he pointedly exempted the military. Last week, a bipartisan group of legislators and policy experts asked an important question: Why?

The group, The Sustainable Defense Task Force, encompasses the political spectrum – from Barney Frank, on the left, to Ron Paul, on the right – along with a host of military reformers. They share a belief that unrestrained military spending is a danger to the budget, and to the country. And they make a persuasive case that we can spend less without sacrificing security.

Today, the United States spends more on its military than during the height of the Cold War. The Soviet Union no longer poses a threat, yet we continue to spend huge sums protecting countries in Europe and Asia. This defense subsidy allows Europeans to provide a level of social welfare far in excess of what the United States offers its citizens. If Germany, France, and Britain bore more of their own defense costs, US tax dollars could go elsewhere, or nowhere.

Overpriced, underperforming weapons systems are a hardy Washington perennial also ripe for the cutting. The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, and the V-22 Osprey – all identified as potential cost savings in the task force report – have been targeted by reformers for years. No less a hawk than Dick Cheney has pronounced the V-22 “a turkey.” That we continue paying for these weapons makes even less sense now that terrorists, not communists, are the enemy.

This sorry state of affairs persists mainly for two reasons. Presidents rarely confront it: Republicans like to spend money on the military, and Democrats are afraid not to. “For years,” Frank said, “the major obstacle to a Democrat winning the presidency was being seen as soft on defense. That’s why Mike Dukakis put on that helmet and got in a tank.”

The other reason is that Congress tends to think about boondoggle weapons systems in the context of jobs, not deficits. Killing a turkey is viewed as eliminating a major employer. (Last month, Frank voted over the objections of the defense secretary to fund a duplicate F-35 engine built in Lynn, but says he'd kill the fighter altogether if it came to a vote.) So we still buy useless weapons, over the protests of reformers and defense officials.

That kind of backward thinking could start to change. Bringing the deficit under control is a zero-sum game. Eventually, we'll have to raise taxes and cut spending. As budget pressure grows, the nearly \$1 trillion in military cuts proposed by the task force could look appealing. One way of getting this done is through the president's Deficit Reduction Commission, which will recommend a package of cuts to Congress in

December for an up-or-down vote. The Sustainable Defense Task Force is lobbying the commission to do what Obama wouldn't: consider military cuts, and in the context of the entire federal budget. Members like Frank and Paul say they'll vote against any package that doesn't, and encourage congressional colleagues to do likewise.

Obama speaks often about overcoming old ways of thinking, but he chooses his fights carefully. He's ducked this one for now. But it's hard to see why he'd maintain the Democrats' defensive crouch, especially when military spending cuts would achieve two things he holds dear. First, it would demonstrate that he's serious about deficit cutting, which might free him and his party from their political stricture. Second, it would give him an opportunity to cooperate with Republicans, and not just moderates, but true deficit hawks like Paul. Targeting wasteful military spending – like, say, those subsidies to the French – might even channel Tea Party anger over government spending toward a productive purpose.

Joshua Green is senior editor of The Atlantic. His column appears regularly in the Globe.

Today, the United States spends more on its military than during the height of the Cold War.

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