



Attack of the Pork Hawks

Loving the Pentagon turns conservatives into big-spending liberals.

By Doug Bandow | February 6, 2012

Conservative politicians want to cut spending—except for the military. Where that’s concerned, they sound like liberals. In fact, conservatives have adopted several liberal ploys to justify today’s bloated military budget.

First, big spenders on the right argue that Washington must continue doing everything that it has ever done abroad. House Armed Services Committee Chairman Howard “Buck” McKeon (R-Calif.), one of the leading pork hawks, has denounced the idea of doing “less with less.”

Yet the Department of Defense spends most of its money to protect other nations, including those that are populous and prosperous. All together, the Europeans have a larger GDP and population than America and ten times the GDP and three times the population of Russia. South Korea has 40 times the GDP and twice the population of North Korea. Why is the U.S. taxpayer still paying for their protection, 67 years after World War II ended?

Even worse has been Washington’s foray into militarized nation-building. The Balkans remains a mess nearly two decades after Washington intervened. The Iraq War weakened America and strengthened Iran. The U.S. has been trying to create a competent, honest, and democratic central government in Kabul for a decade. None of these missions advances U.S. security.

But that raises the second excuse that phony conservatives use to justify a bloated Pentagon. Like liberals spending on education, these right-wingers equate money with results. Thus bigger Pentagon budgets mean increased national security. Only it’s not true: greater military spending is strategic waste on a grand scale.

While the world is dangerous, it is not particularly dangerous to America. The U.S. is surrounded by oceans east and west and friendly neighbors north and south. America is allied with every major industrialized state save Russia and China. Washington already has a thousand military installations around the world. The

American navy is equivalent to that of next 13 navies combined, 11 of which belong to U.S. allies.

Washington spends as much as the rest of the world—and spends more, in real terms, than at any point during the Korean War, Vietnam War, or Cold War. America could spend less and still possess far larger and more capable forces than anyone else.

Such overcapacity actually encourages Washington to meddle in foreign conflicts that foolishly deplete our military capital. As a result, guys using AK-47s and improvised explosive devices tied down the world's greatest power for years in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Terrorism remains a threat, but not an existential one like the old Soviet Russia. Moreover, Al-Qaeda has been wrecked by relatively inexpensive techniques short of conventional war: good intelligence, Special Forces strikes, international cooperation, financial sanctions. In contrast, the invasion of Iraq created an entirely new class of terrorists, some of whom have migrated to other conflicts, such as Libya and Syria.

The third idea spendthrift militarists have recycled from the liberals of yesteryear is using “baseline budgeting” to complain that Barack Obama has “cut” defense outlays. This is the same way Democrats once charged that Ronald Reagan drastically “cut” domestic spending—by reducing the rate of increase.

Total military outlays were \$306 billion in 2001. Since then they have risen steadily, breaching the \$700 billion barrier under Barack Obama in 2011. In real, inflation-adjusted terms, expenditures increased 74.5 percent over the last decade. In the Obama administration's first two years inflation-adjusted military spending rose 16.8 percent. Outlays last year, in real terms, were 23.5 percent above the Korean War peak in 1953, 22.5 percent above the Vietnam War peak in 1968, and 35.8 percent above the Reagan build-up peak in 1989.

Spending will stop racing ahead this year but not because of real cuts: the administration has only proposed reducing planned increases over the coming decade by \$487 billion. As former House Majority Leader Richard Armey observed, these “cuts” are “only from the bloated CBO baseline. This means that [Obama] is merely reducing projected military spending, as opposed to cutting current spending.”

If Congress does not trim overall spending by \$1.2 trillion over the coming decade, the sequestration agreed to during last summer's debt ceiling debate is supposed to kick in, with the equivalent amount in cuts divided equally between domestic and military outlays. This prospect has caused much neoconservative wailing and gnashing of teeth.

In fact, say Veronique de Rugy of the Mercatus Center and Ben Friedman of the Cato Institute, non-war outlays would still increase, only “by about 10 percent today, as opposed to the 18 percent the administration wants.” (War expenses are exempted.) Overall, they figure, as a result of sequestration military expenditures would grow by 18 percent rather than 20 percent from now through 2021.

The present rate of growth is too much even for some hawks. “Under sequestration, the Defense Department would still be spending more money in 2021 than it is spending today,” adds Andrew McCarthy of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. “Moreover, that spending increase—not cut, increase—comes atop a decade-long spending bonanza.”

Yet some of the most prominent neoconservatives are scaremongers. Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations cites an estimate that the combined effect of all “cuts” would result in a 31 percent drop in real military spending. But even if this “worst case” came to pass, real outlays would be at 2007 levels, which were 39 percent higher than in 2001. Moreover, the reduction would come when the U.S. was no longer fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. America would still lap the rest of the world in the global arms race.

The fourth tactic for conservatives addicted to military-industrial pixie dust is playing the “Washington Monument” game—threatening to kill the most important programs (in this case, weapon systems) first. Just as liberals, faced with demands for cuts to local budgets, will threaten schools, police, and fire departments first, pork hawks want to claim that DoD reductions must come out of indispensable programs. Again, that’s not true: military cutbacks should start with force structure, especially army units.

With allies capable of defending themselves, the U.S. should not plan on fighting a major land war in Europe or Asia. And there should be no more nation-building. The U.S. should maintain superior air and naval forces, but in smaller numbers sufficient to prevent attack on America rather than to police the globe. Such a strategic readjustment does not mean the end of our ability to project force abroad: America would continue to act as an off-shore balancer capable of aiding friendly states against a hostile power seeking Eurasian hegemony. This would not only be more affordable but makes greater strategic sense than behaving as an in-region meddler determined to micromanage local conflicts.

Could the unexpected occur? Of course. Should the U.S. have a surge capacity in the event of an emergency? Certainly. Should Washington adjust its plans if international circumstances change? Definitely. But it makes no sense to maintain an oversized military for decades because someday a country like China might behave badly. When that time comes, a bloated Defense apparatus would be too slow and encumbered to act.

The fifth and last resort of Washington big-spenders is demagoguery. Advocates of a colossal military trash their opponents as “isolationists” who want to undermine America. Columnist Lurita Doan accused President Obama of seeking “to render our military neither well-armed nor well-planned.” New Zealand blogger Trevor Loudon—neoconservatives are nothing if not globalist—charged that “hard-bitten Leninists and disciplined Marxists” were behind plans to reduce U.S. military outlays.

Just look at the hype. Reductions in military spending, we are told, would be “totally destructive” and “very dangerous to the survival of the country,” would “destroy” the Pentagon, set America on a “perilous course,” be “dangerous and irresponsible,” leave America “in the greatest peril,” “would decimate our military,” threaten America’s “national security interests,” be “totally devastating,” send “a very horrible message” to America’s enemies, create the “threat of gutting national security,” “break” the military, “invite aggression,” cause “severe and irreversible impact,” leave America “teetering on the precipice of disaster,” cause “catastrophic damage,” “put our national security on the chopping block,” leave “a hollow force,” “disarm the United States unilaterally,” result in “American lives lost,” fail “to provide for the safety and security of our country,” and call “into question our nation’s ability to remain a free people.”

All of this from returning military outlays to 2007 levels.

The fundamental question is whether military spending should respond to the threat environment. Leading Republicans answer no: America must always and in every situation spend more.

Pork hawks routinely denounce the post-Cold War drawdown, a 27.8 percent drop in real outlays from peak to trough that was erased in just six years. The Soviet Union had disintegrated. The Warsaw Pact had dissolved. Maoism had disappeared from China. Colin Powell observed that he was running out of enemies—down to Kim Il-sung and Fidel Castro. Still the pork hawks wailed. And some go farther. Max Boot decries every previous drawdown, including after the Revolutionary War.

Congressman J. Randy Forbes (R-Va.) complains that spending reductions would result in an America “that can go fewer places and do fewer things.” But what if going to most of those “places” and doing most of those “things” does not advance U.S. interests? Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta has testified that military cutbacks might require reducing “our presence perhaps in Latin America, our presence in Africa.” So?

There are bad actors in the world, but they need not automatically be America’s problem. Gen. Robert H. Scales (ret.) argues that “We cannot pick our enemies; our enemies will pick us.” Actually, in recent years Washington has done most of the picking and attacking: Haiti, Bosnia, Serbia, Iraq, Libya.

Max Boot similarly asserts: “Certainly there has not been—nor is there likely to be—a decreased demand for the armed forces. They are constantly having new missions thrown their way, from defending our nation’s computer networks to deposing a dictator in Libya and providing relief to Japanese tsunami survivors.” None of these tasks justifies maintaining a titanic military in a constitutional republic facing a troubled future of deficits, debts, and unfunded liabilities.

Even those who say military outlays can never be cut must ultimately decide how much is enough. Half of the world’s outlays? Three-quarters? Four-fifths? Even if Washington could afford to spend ever more, the rest of the world might not go along with America’s plan. If the U.S. spends more to contain China, China is sure to ramp up its outlays to deter us. After all, Americans would not stand idly by if another country placed bases in Mexico and Canada, used its fleets to patrol the Gulf of Mexico and both coasts, and casually talked of war to contain American ambitions. China will act no differently.

America is more secure today than at any point since before World War II. Military outlays should be reduced accordingly.

That will require scaling back Washington’s international objectives. But the U.S. should stop garrisoning the globe, subsidizing rich friends, and reconstructing poor enemies. Instead, it’s about time Washington focused on defending America and its people.

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