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Convert defense cuts into civilian benefits

Shrinking the Pentagon gives the U.S. a chance to bolster education, energy and infrastructure

By Charlie Cooper

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Weapons-makers, ideologues and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta are busy whipping up fears in reaction to scheduled reductions in our bloated military budget. Don't be fooled. These cuts will not put our security at risk, though they will cut into profits and executive pay at certain defense-establishment corporations.

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In this time of debilitating unemployment and financial disaster, our slavish devotion to military spending undercuts our opportunity to rebuild America. Military expenditures have doubled in constant dollars since 2001. Even without the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the increase is more than 50 percent. This excessive spending depresses the economy, costs jobs, degrades our reputation among nations, and makes us no safer.

The threat from al-Qaeda and other, similar, low-tech jihadists cannot justify maintaining a vastly oversized nuclear arsenal and approximately 1,000 foreign bases.

War budgets are now are much higher than during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union posed a serious military threat. According to the independent military information aggregator, Globalsecurity.org, the U.S. possesses 20 of the world's 32 aircraft carriers. NATO allies operate seven, while China and Russia each have one. Globalsecurity.org comments: "Sometimes it is difficult to understand the scope of American military power relative to that of the rest of the world."

We maintain a similar advantage in other aspects of military power. With 4.3 percent of the world's population, we account for about 48 percent of global military spending, according to the Cato Institute. Our allies in Europe account for 19 percent, while other friendly countries incur much of the rest. China and Russia combine for about 12 percent of worldwide expenditures, but they are certainly not U.S. enemies as they were during the Cold War.

Why, then, do we borrow to spend almost \$200 billion more per year than we spent in 1969, during the peak of the Cold War — when we had 500,000 troops in Vietnam? As in other aspects of our political life, corporate influence on Congress weighs too heavily.

Nevertheless, starting in January 2013, reducing military spending by \$54.7 billion annually will be the law of

the land (because of the debt reduction compromise and the failure of the supercommittee to produce a plan). War spending is also slated to drop substantially. We will still be spending too much — more than \$600 billion per year.

These reductions can significantly improve our economic prospects. Moreover, further reductions should be phased in over time, and the projected savings should be spent as soon as possible to revive our lethargic economy and put people to work improving infrastructure, bolstering our public education system (which is suffering from budget crises in nearly every state), and developing and implementing alternative energy sources.

In other words, in order to prosper, we should fund our communities rather than weapons and war.

Here's an example of how community and military needs are in competition. Each of the new gee-whiz F-35 fighter jets is slated to cost about \$156 million, assuming no further cost overruns. The military services are budgeting for 2,457 of them (not a typo) over the next two decades. For the cost of one such plane, Baltimore City could build three new high schools, yet the Congress has repeatedly refused to help cash-strapped local school boards renovate or replace deteriorating school buildings.

And by the way, no potential enemy has anything like the F-35, either in sophistication or in pure numbers. A recent article in *The Atlantic* states, "In a decade's time, the United States plans to have 15 times as many modern fighters as China, and 20 times as many as Russia."

Buying all these F-35s is a waste; they'll most likely sit unused. That's one reason why military expenditures actually subtract from our economy. Researchers at the National Bureau of Economic Research have shown that for each dollar borrowed to spend on the military, the economy shrinks by 10 to 30 cents, compared to leaving these funds in the private sector.

On the other hand, mainstream economists estimate that each dollar borrowed by the federal government to provide aid to the states or enhance infrastructure grows the economy by an additional 38 to 59 cents because money spent that way employs more workers, circulates more quickly in our domestic economy, and provides a basis for future prosperity.

Unfortunately, the schedule of military cuts will be used only to pay down the national debt. Supporting education and improving infrastructure and energy are as essential to national security as are armies and navies. With tens of millions unemployed and more millions of discouraged citizens withdrawing from the workforce, we ought to get started on rebuilding America.

We have an important choice to make now. We can open more foreign bases; "invest" in more F-35 fighters when other nations have no comparable weapons; replace our entire nuclear arsenal at a cost of \$185 billion over 10 years; and continue the war in Afghanistan at \$8 billion or \$10 billion per month. Or we can strengthen the United States of America and the people who live here.

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