

To balance books, start with defense

By Ray Clasen

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Anecdotal accounts of welfare fraud never fail to elicit howls of outrage and calls for reform of the system. But whatever waste, fraud or inefficiency that might exist in the welfare system pales to insignificance when we look at what's going on over at the Pentagon. There, the books are in such a mess the agency cannot even be audited, despite a 1997 law that requires annual audits of federal agencies. If the Pentagon was a private business, it would have failed years ago, sunk under the weight of financial mismanagement. So where's the outrage among taxpayers and politicians?

Far from demanding fiscal responsibility from the Pentagon, politicians of both parties are calling for increased defense spending and are willing to take money from programs that help the less fortunate to achieve it. The same politicians who regularly lecture the American people on the urgent need to reduce the federal deficit willfully overlook the obvious place to start.

The U.S. defense budget is larger than that of the next 10 countries combined, including China and Russia. The Pentagon accounts for about 40 percent of global military spending. One of every five tax dollars is spent on defense; more than half of discretionary spending goes to defense. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have cost \$1.5 trillion, while the regular Pentagon budget increased 45 percent between 2001 and 2010, and the funds to fight the wars have come entirely from borrowing, adding 20 percent to the national debt.

Maybe during the Cold War there was some flimsy justification for a bloated military budget, although we now know the Soviet threat was exaggerated, but surely not today. Where is our peace dividend? How many ICBMs, nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers do we need to fight Islamic jihadists? Do we really need the more than 1,000 military installations scattered across the globe (where the Pentagon operates more than 170 golf courses)?

Before he became Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel famously called for our antiquated defense establishment to be "pared down" and retooled for the 21st century and he now seems to have begun that process. But while he pares and retools, defense spending will actually rise over the next five years.

Only in some twisted neocon fantasy of American Empire is there justification for the gargantuan military establishment we currently possess. In today's geopolitical world, what possible scenarios exist under which a leaner, more cutting edge U.S. military could not respond to threats to American lives and property? The sad reality is the Pentagon has become such a sacred cow in our society our political leaders, especially those who never served in the military, consider it political suicide to suggest even modest budget cuts; Congress even votes funding for military projects the Pentagon neither needs nor wants.

No one is advocating cuts that might jeopardize national security, but think tanks such as the Cato Institute and the Center for American Progress have suggested realistic cuts such as canceling the boondoggle F-15 fighter jet and retiring two of the Navy's 11 aircraft carrier groups. Those cuts that add up to almost \$500 billion over 10 years. Think what we could do with this money: rebuild our crumbling infrastructure; improve our schools; shore up Social Security and Medicare; pay down the national debt.

Any discussion of balancing the federal books should start with defense spending, and politicians who immediately want to whip defense off the table should not be taken seriously; we need less reverence for the military establishment and more sanity if we are genuinely committed.