

HUFFPOST POLITICS

[William Hartung](#)

Director, Arms and Security Project, Center for International Policy

GET UPDATES FROM William Hartung

Is It Safe to Cut the Pentagon Budget?

Posted: 7/11/11 12:41 PM ET

Amid reports that President Obama and House Republicans may be zeroing in on a budget deal that could [cut](#) as much as \$700 billion from the Pentagon's proposed budgets over the next decade, the "spend now, ask questions later" crowd is poised to make a political counterattack. Whether a number approaching this level comes out of the budget talks remains to be seen, but even the fact that it has been rumored suggests that significant reductions in military spending may finally be on the table. Which is exactly what has *Weekly Standard* editor Bill Kristol, the Heritage Foundation and their allies in the [Foreign Policy Initiative](#) so worked up. These are the folks who helped bring us the Iraq war, yet they expect us to treat them as sober, objective analysts who can forecast the most likely security threats facing the nation going forward.

In a [blog post](#) prominently featured on his publication's website, Kristol asserted that,

"Any such abdication of our basic national security responsibilities should be unacceptable -- especially to Republicans, who want to claim to be the party of American strength. For what it's worth, I for one could not support such a deal, and would do what I could to mobilize others to defeat it."

In another venue -- a [hearing](#) held on Thursday by the House Budget Committee -- Heritage Foundation fellow and former Senator Jim Talent [recited](#) the misguided mantra that defense cuts lead to a "hollow military," and that we would therefore regret making any reductions in military spending. Even Donald Rumsfeld has come out of the woodwork to [write](#) of the "peril" of defense cuts, making arguments that track closely with Talent's. Talent and Rumsfeld make these arguments despite the fact that in recent years, military spending has been at its highest levels since World War II, as documented in a recent [report](#) from the Center for American Progress (CAP).

The CAP report also notes that presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton all presided over significant "build-downs" in military spending while still leaving the United States with the most powerful military forces on the planet. The same can be done now, despite the cries of gloom and doom coming from the neocons.

In his [testimony](#) at the same hearing attended by Talent, Gordon Adams of the Stimson Center explained how substantial reductions can be carried out, noting along the way that "the United States has never been as secure as it is today." As Lawrence Korb [points out](#) in an essay in *Politico*, al Qaeda does not pose an existential threat to the United States. And there need be no arms race with China, which [spends](#) about one-seventh of what the United States spends on its military. As Adams notes, "There is ample room here for a long-term strategy that maintains our military power and presence in the Pacific region, avoids an arms race, and engages China on the diplomatic, economic, and financial levels." And if we stay out of the business of putting large numbers of "boots on the ground" in unnecessary and often futile efforts at large scale counterinsurgency and nation building, it will be possible to reduce the number of troops in our armed forces, a major source of potential savings.

How will we know if the cuts that come out of the impending budget deal are real? There are a few simple ways to figure that out:

- 1) Do the cuts start soon (no later than next year's budget submission) or are the bulk of them proposed to occur years down the road when the current administration may not even be in power?
- 2) Are there significant cuts in force structure (the numbers of personnel in the military and the resources needed to support them)?
- 3) Will major weapons programs be cut, and not replaced by equally costly alternatives?
- 4) Will there be reforms in military health care to stem the mushrooming costs of providing benefits to retired military personnel?
- 5) Will claims of "efficiencies" and elimination of "waste, fraud and abuse" be backed up with specific examples of how that will be done?
- 6) Most importantly, will the administration articulate a new strategy that streamlines the missions and redefines the purpose of our military at a time when many of the most urgent threats we face -- from terrorism to nuclear proliferation to climate change -- cannot be effectively addressed with large scale conventional forces?

A number of expert groups have provided detailed proposals for meeting these requirements, from the [Sustainable Defense Task Force](#), to the president's [deficit commission](#), to the Domenici-Rivlin task force [report](#), to the [Stimson Center](#), to the [Center for American Progress](#) to the [Cato Institute](#). If large portions of any of these plans

-- which call for savings of [up to](#) \$1.4 trillion in military spending over the next decade -- are adopted by the president or the Congress, we will know that a significant defense "build-down" is under way.

The sky won't fall if we make sensible defense cuts, no matter what the *Weekly Standard*, Heritage, the American Enterprise Institute and other boosters of an endless military buildup may say.

William D. Hartung is the director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy and the author of Prophets of War: Lockheed Martin and the Making of the Military-Industrial Complex (Nation Books).