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Cutting Defense: Obama, Gates Say No

Robert Dreyfuss | February 16, 2011

President Obama and Secretary of Defense Gates are defending the indefensible, namely, defense. Against clamor to cut the Pentagon's bloated budget coming from both the right and the left, from anti-DOD liberals, antiwar activists, ultra-conservative Tea Party types who want to slash all government spending and libertarians who propose cutting defense by 90 percent, the White House and Gates are sounding like, well, reactionaries. Gates, who'd earlier warned that even modest cuts in the 2011 budget for defense could be "catastrophic," said today [1] that the result of cutting Pentagon spending could be "tragic":

"We still live in a very dangerous and often unstable world. We shrink from our global security responsibilities at our peril. Retrenchment brought about by short-sighted cuts could well lead to costlier and more tragic consequences later—indeed as they have in the past."

Testifying in front of the House Armed Services Committee, Gates—a right-wing Republican held over from the George W. Bush administration—also said [2]:

"We shrink from our global security responsibilities at our peril. Drastic reductions in the size and strength of the US military make armed conflict all the more likely—with an unacceptably high cost in American blood and treasure."

Those remarks will resonate with the charter members of the military-industrial complex and its Iron Triangle in Congress, the bipartisan stooges of Boeing, Northup-Grumman, Lockheed Martin and the rest, including John Boehner [3], who's busily defending makers of a military jet engine that no one, not even Obama and Gates, wants, simply because it's made in Ohio not far from the Congressional district he represents.

Others beg to disagree, however.

There's a consensus developing that the Defense Department, in 2011 and especially in the next budget, for 2012, will take some substantial hits. Despite the Iron Triangle (defense manufacturers and lobbyists, the generals and the members of Congressional appropriations committees), the broader Congress is looking at the Pentagon for big savings. Yesterday, I asked Gordon Adams [4] of the Stimson Center, who's spent many years suggesting Pentagon reforms and cuts, whether the current Congress might take a big bite out of Defense. "It's startlingly likely," he said, noting that he's seeing the start

of a tug of war between the appropriations and authorization committees for DOD, which are usually lock-step in support of the Pentagon, and the rest of Congress, which has cuts in mind. Plus, he said, polls show that at least 55 percent of American voters prefer that Congress cut defense rather than Medicare and Social Security. Larry Korb [5], of the Center for American Progress [6], a Republican and a former Defense Department official, said that polls show the public would support cuts of $100 billion a year or more.

Obama and Gates, in their budget, propose to spend $553 billion in 2012, not including funding for Iraq and Afghanistan, which adds another $118 billion to DOD, for a total of $681 billion. To mollify critics, in his five-year projection through 2016, Gates has proposed cutting a total of $78 billion in projected growth. But that's sleight of hand: Gates isn't proposing to reduce spending, just slightly modify the staggering expansion of DOD spending over the years between 2012 and 2016. In all, projections show that in the coming decade defense spending will total more than $6 trillion, and that's not counting Afghanistan and other wars that might be fought. Many analysts have argued that DOD spending could be drastically reduced without the "tragic" results Gates complains about. As I've written for *The Nation* [7], the Cato Institute has proposed cuts amounting to 20 percent, or about $1.2 trillion, over that span. Similarly, Barney Frank (D.-Mass.), Ron Paul (R.-Tex.) and the Sustainable Defense Task Force [8]have identified $960 billion in cuts over the next ten years.

Adams says that even Gates's projected savings of $78 billion is "soft," since it comes from things such as questionable estimates of inflation rates and future predictions that aren't at all certain. He notes that between 1985 and 1998, the total number of US troops fell by 700,000, the number of civilian employees by 300,000, spending on procurement of weapons fell by half, and overall defense spending was slashed by 30 percent. There are plenty of analysts who argue that similar, or even sharper cuts, are possible now.

"We're on the edge of a build-down," says Adams. "And the build-down is inevitable."

Links:
[1] http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/16/usa-budget-defense-idUSN1623962920110216
[2] http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gj5_pdAivPIrit9bR6bwk1E5aQ0g?docId=CNG.45cca10ebab65a1024a443b2db02b658.1d1
[3] http://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory?id=12930561
[4] http://www.stimson.org/experts/gordon-adams/
[5] http://www.americanprogress.org/experts/KorbLawrence.html
[6] http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/02/defense_cuts_mandatory.html
[7] http://www.thenation.com/article/158094/gop-fires-pentagon

[8] http://www.house.gov/frank/issues/06-11-10-debts-deficits-and-defense.pdf
[9] http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/nationnow/id399704758?mt=8