



Sequestration is still better than the alternatives

By: Christopher Preble – February 7, 2013

Late last year, then-Republican Study Committee Chairman Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH) said of the impending sequester, “The only thing that’s worse than cutting national defense is not having any scheduled cuts at all.”

It turns out, there is something worse: no cuts, or only modest ones, far less than was called for under sequestration, and additional taxes to cover the difference. That is what we are likely to see if President Obama gets his way. In a last-minute bid to avert the spending cuts mandated under the 2011 Budget Control Act, the president on Tuesday offered a package of short-term spending cuts and tax reforms in lieu of automatic cuts. Then, on Wednesday, the White House continued its full-court stop-the-sequester press by meeting with a group of defense contractor CEOs.

But while many Republicans seem anxious to accept such a deal, the GOP should stand fast. U.S. taxpayers already spend too much on the military, in part because we expect our military to do too much. We could achieve substantial savings, at least as much as is foreseen under sequestration, if we revisit the military’s missions, and adapt our capabilities to meet new threats.

First, some context. The United States spends far more for everything lumped under the rubric “national security” than any other country — both in real terms, and on a per capita basis — and total spending remains high by historical standards. Spending on defense and international security assistance actually *increased* from 2011 to 2012 by about \$11 billion, from \$718 to \$729 billion. (The Mercatus Center’s Veronique de Rugy calculates that a more accurate total, including the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security, approaches nearly \$930 billion.) According to the CBO’s latest estimates, the Pentagon’s base budget under sequestration will average about \$542 billion per year from 2014 to 2021, and that doesn’t include war costs. That is more than we spent during most years of the Cold War, even after adjusting for inflation.

Spending is not the best measure of military effectiveness, and conservatives, especially, should know this. Some still do. A letter signed by eight different organizations, including Americans for Tax Reform, the National Taxpayers Union, and Taxpayers for Common Sense, calls for “eliminating outdated, Cold War-era weapons, cutting programs the military doesn’t even want, reforming military health care programs, and closing unneeded bases.” Such reforms, the letter concludes, “will not only save taxpayers billions, they will also make our nation stronger by helping safeguard our financial security.”

ATR President Grover Norquist puts it even more succinctly. “Spending is not

caring,” Norquist explained in a recent interview with *The American Conservative* magazine. “Spending is what politicians do instead of caring.”

And they finance this spending with taxes, or debt, which is simply deferred taxation. It is hardly surprising that the leaders of some of the top defense contractors, businesses whose profits are built on taxpayer money, want more of it. But that doesn’t explain why conservatives, especially, seem so eager to oblige.

One explanation for the GOP’s cognitive dissonance is the erroneous belief that Pentagon spending stimulates the economy, and that cuts would cause hundreds of thousands of people to lose their jobs. So says the Aerospace Industries Association (AIA), despite the fact that Northrup Grumman CEO Wes Bush, the group’s new chairman, once said, “The defense industry should never be looked at as a jobs program.”

He’s right. The purpose of the military budget is to provide our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines with the tools that they need to do their jobs. If this can be accomplished while employing fewer people and spending less money in the process, all the better. That would free up individuals and resources to be used elsewhere in the economy, especially in the more productive private sector.

A number of commentators, from Ramesh Ponnuru to Tyler Cowen, have demolished the generic jobs argument. The AIA’s figures, in particular, haven’t fared any better. A state-by-state analysis published this morning by William Hartung of the Center for International Policy should nail the coffin shut.

Another common concern among Republicans is that defense spending is a core function of government, and therefore should not be treated on an equal footing with federal spending on education, agricultural subsidies, or Obamacare. This is true, to a point. The Constitution clearly stipulates that the federal government provide for the common defense. Our founding document contains no mention of common learning standards for grade schoolers, guaranteed prices for a bushel of wheat for farmers, or powered wheelchairs for senior citizens.

But the Constitution was written for these United States, and the government it created should defend the 315 million Americans who are parties to its unique social contract. Today, the U.S. military remains largely focused on defending other countries from non-existent threats. The Red Army is no longer in Eastern Europe; why is the U.S. Army still in Germany? Meanwhile, many of today’s most urgent challenges are not conducive to military solutions. Aircraft carriers aren’t very useful for stopping distributed denial of service attacks against American businesses. Adapting to these realities would allow for substantial savings in the Pentagon, well beyond what is contemplated under sequestration.

In short, an effective defense need not be an expensive defense, and certainly not as expensive as the military that defeated the Soviet Union. By restructuring our military to address its most solemn obligation — defending the United States — we can keep faith with our troops, and reduce the burden on U.S. taxpayers.