



Bipartisan Bloat

If there's one thing that Obama and Romney agree on, it's more military spending. Too bad they're both wrong.

Christopher Preble | September 5, 2012

The Republican Party has become a hallmark of inconsistency. The GOP claims to be committed to small government and fiscal discipline, yet advocates huge increases in military spending. At the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida, a parade of party leaders and minor dignitaries predicted that President Barack Obama was poised to implement a massive increase in federal spending in a second term, funded by even-more-massive tax increases. The key to turning around the American economy, they say, is to free up resources in the private sector, cut taxes, and shrink the size of government -- excepting, of course, the Pentagon.

The party that opposes nearly all other forms of federal spending happily embraces the military variety. Republicans assert that military spending cuts will result in massive job losses, even as they argue that cuts in other federal spending would grow the economy and create jobs in the private sector. They are skeptical that the federal government should engage in nation-building at home, but celebrate it abroad. Republican candidate Mitt Romney accuses Obama of fostering a "culture of dependency" in the United States, yet ignores that U.S. security guarantees have created an entire class of affluent countries around the world that now rely upon U.S. tax dollars to pay for their defense.

The GOP's call to increase military spending sends a clear message to the world: If Romney is elected president, the U.S. military will become even more active than it has been over the past decade. The United States will continue to subsidize wealthy allies, allowing them a free ride on America's coattails. As Uncle Sam spends more on its military, other countries, but especially those sheltering under the American security umbrella, will funnel even more money toward their bloated welfare systems and ignore their obligation to defend their citizens and their interests. It amounts to an expensive and counterproductive form of foreign aid (which the GOP also often opposes).

In fairness to Romney, this pattern will likely continue if Obama is reelected. After all, he hasn't been anxious to kick other countries off the dole. In his State of the Union address this year, the president affirmed his belief that the United States is still the world's "indispensable nation," and his National Security Strategy is equally emphatic: "[T]here should be no doubt: the United States of America will continue to underwrite global security."

Obama's unwillingness to make deep cuts in military spending confirms his rhetoric. Over the next decade, the Pentagon's annual base budget (which excludes most war costs) will average \$517 billion in constant 2012 dollars, 11 percent higher than what Americans spent during the George W. Bush years. Obama's proposed budget does not conform to the levels demanded under the "sequestration" provisions of last year's budget deal. His reasoning is straightforward: He wants Republicans to agree to tax increases to offset the extra Pentagon spending. It is a clever ploy that highlights the inconsistency and confusion within GOP ranks. Some Republicans are open to tax increases to pay for an even-larger military, but Romney is not. It isn't clear, however, how he would pay for his promised increases, which exceed the president's plans by at least \$1.7 trillion over the next decade. Anti-tax crusaders like Grover Norquist have urged Romney to reconsider his plans to spend more on the Pentagon, and Norquist has more support than you might think on Capitol Hill.

Republicans could reasonably claim that military spending should get a pass because the Constitution clearly stipulates a federal role in defending the country. But nowhere is it written that Americans must provide security for others; that is the job of their governments, not America's.

Indeed, the Republicans' reflexive commitment to more military spending is particularly curious given their appreciation for how incentives work in the domestic sphere. Republicans know quite well that people are not inclined to pay for things that others will provide for them. GOP leaders speak often of moral hazards -- when individuals or businesses behave irresponsibly because others are there to bail them out. The same problem exists in international politics, but is strangely ignored in the GOP's plan to continue policing the world.

Extending the Constitution's "common defence" provisions to Western Europe and East Asia might have made sense in the early days of the Cold War, when these countries were broken, and broke, and the United States was confronting a common foe. But Washington should have shed these security commitments after the Soviet Union landed on the ash heap of history. It makes even more sense to rethink U.S. strategic objectives as other countries grow wealthier. Instead, as it stands today, the United States accounts for nearly 50 percent of global military spending, and that share will rise if America's allies cut their military spending, as many have already done.

If Romney were to call for reducing the burdens on U.S. troops and taxpayers by expecting other countries to do more, he might actually win over some undecided

voters. There is little evidence that Americans are interested in subsidizing allies and paying higher taxes to increase the defense budget. On the contrary, some polls find strong bipartisan support for significant cuts in military spending. A military focused on defending core U.S. national security interests could be smaller, and far less expensive.

Some conservatives, including a few of the speakers at the Republican National Convention, are willing to consider cuts in military spending as part of a package that would also include deep cuts in domestic spending. It begins by understanding what the United States spends, and why. Senators Tom Coburn and Rand Paul are backing a plan to audit the Pentagon. In remarks in Tampa on Aug. 26, Paul explained, "Republicans need to acknowledge that not every dollar is well spent or sacred in the military, and we have to look for ways to make every department accountable."

Such change is unlikely if Romney carries through with his plan to grow the military's budget to levels not seen since World War II. But it isn't too late for the nominee, and his party, to recall their opposition to government spending, writ large, and to revisit their plan to ask Americans to spend even more to subsidize the defense of wealthy allies that are more than capable of defending themselves.