

The Other Army Green

No, we should not lift the military sequester.

By Kevin D. Williamson

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Defense spending is simply irresistible, in the sense that it has the Pentagon and Congress singing a line from that wretched old Robert Palmer chestnut: “There’s no telling where the money went.”

The money, or the “small arms, ammunition, night-vision goggles, patrol boats, vehicles, and other supplies,” either — as the Washington Post reports, cataloging the gear that the Defense Department sends to Yemen that it no longer can account for and that almost certainly is headed into the arsenals of the Osama bin Laden Fan Club or friends of the atomic ayatollahs.

Our old friend Anonymous Legislative Aide — it wouldn’t be happy hour without him — explains: “We have to assume it’s completely compromised and gone.”

If that’s the way the military-industrial complex is going to treat its toys, it doesn’t deserve to have any.

Three cheers for the sequester.

On the matter of military spending, the federal government calls to mind one of those bad stewards who figure so prominently in the New Testament: “He that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.” When you think about those hundreds of trillions of dollars in unfunded entitlement liabilities, you might be tempted to roll your eyes at relatively picayune examples of government waste, but consider that the perks that go along with being an admiral or general — the private jets, the chefs, the entourages — cost taxpayers around \$1 million a year per flag officer, which is no small thing when you have about a thousand of them. We have an army of generals and more admirals than battleships.

Does the Pentagon spend its money wisely? Nobody knows — especially not the Pentagon. It has a long and inglorious history of book-cooking and accounting that alternates between the incompetent and the criminal: a half a trillion dollars in unaudited contracts here; untold sums lost to outright theft and fraud there; shocking waste; vogueish nonsense like spending \$150/gallon for environmentally friendly fighter-jet fuel so that we can blow stuff to smithereens and kill people in an environmentally responsible fashion, etc.

Add to all that a \$1 billion per annum undersecretariat charged with managing a feel-good fiefdom that includes both an Office of Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity — so that no Navy SEAL gets his feelings hurt for lack of sensitivity training — and a Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, which is an entire school in Florida dedicated to “intercultural communication,” gender sensitivity, and the like. It also has one of those stupid reverse acronyms: “Respect,” “Excellence,” “Awareness,” etc., spelling out “Readiness,” which kind of makes me want to join Boko Haram. The “D,” you will have guessed, stands for “Diversity,” here defined as “an understanding that our strengths derive from our differences as well as our shared values, goals, and ethics.” A commander of people with identical haircuts, arranged in ranks, wearing what are, lest we forget, known as uniforms wants you to know that our strengths derive from our differences.

There’s billions and billions and billions of dollars of that — and that is the small stuff.

The big stuff is strategic. Or not exactly strategic: Benjamin Friedman of Cato makes a compelling case that what we have does not quite deserve to be called a “strategy,” inasmuch as a strategy requires the intelligent and deliberate ranking of priorities, a project that we pretty much categorically refuse to engage in, instead indulging in threat inflation spurred by what he calls an “overly capacious definition of security.”

Which is to say, our definition of “security” is driven not by actual threats but by hope, a naïve belief that every good thing in the world that might be accomplished with the assistance of the U.S. military brings with it goodwill and therefore contributes to our security. If you are going to use the military to install large-screen televisions at (now abandoned) Ebola clinics in Liberia, you are going to pay for it. Ebola containment is on the reasonably sensible side of things. Sending in the cavalry — not the metaphorical cavalry but the literal (literal, Mr. Vice President!) cavalry is something you do when there’s a fight on; somebody else can hand out schoolbooks.

Presumably, we could send in special forces to fix Kim Jong-un’s weird hipster haircut and call that a contribution to national security, if he liked the new ’do.

But those guys are there to give haircuts of a different kind.

There are people in this world who need killing and stuff that needs blowing to smithereens, and giving our soldiers the best weapons and equipment is the right thing to do. And there is wisdom in the argument that maintaining an overwhelmingly superior fighting force (provided there exists the political will to use it) is probably less expensive in the long run than failing to do so. The presence of such a fighting force is the reason the people who attack the United States in the 21st century are not nation-states but members of a death cult with nothing to lose. If you have something to lose, you don’t poke that bear.

But that doesn't mean that everything the military does needs doing, or that the money it spends on doing what actually does need doing is well spent. Republicans are looking to lift the military half of the sequester in the hopes of shunting a few hundred billion dollars more into the gazillion-dollar stream of appropriations that flows through the war-fighting apparatus. The Democrats' alternative is lifting both sides of the sequester.

Until somebody can explain why we're mothballing ships while minting admirals, the sequester should stay — every last farthing of it.