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Military exemption

No spending curb for the Pentagon

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The defense budget has been growing at a brisk pace in recent years, one reason the federal deficit is so big. But fiscal realities are likely to put a stop to the binge. President Barack Obama has proposed \$400 billion in savings over the next 12 years, and in negotiations with congressional Republicans, cuts as big as \$700 billion have been discussed.

At the moment, though, frugality is something for the future. Last week, the House, which has voted to curb or cut spending for other federal departments, agreed to boost the base Pentagon budget by \$17 billion, to \$530 billion, on top of \$119 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The House had the opportunity to exercise some healthy restraint. But a bill to freeze spending next year went down to defeat. So did a compromise that would have cut the raise by half. Austerity may be the new reality for other programs. Not yet for the military. Keep that in mind when you hear the lofty promises from the deficit reduction negotiations.

Big defense spenders will argue that skimping on the protection of national security is a false economy, and they're right. But there's plenty of room to cut without risk. The House, for example, included funds for a cargo jet the Air Force doesn't want.

It also barred the Pentagon from retiring six of 66 B-1 bombers, as the White House prefers. So what if these Cold War-era bombers look increasingly less vital in an age of pilotless drones? The measure prohibiting the use of funds to shelve the planes was sponsored by Texas Republican Randy Neugebauer — whose district happens to include a B-1 base.

You don't have to look at specifics to know the Defense Department could manage all right without this increase in funding. Benjamin Friedman, a defense analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute, notes that when it came to paying for the war in Libya that began in March, the administration didn't ask Congress for extra appropriations, for fear they would not be approved. Instead, it scrounged money from other accounts — which suggests that budget has ample room for economizing.

The outlook is not as poor as it may seem, though. The House bill provides \$9 billion less than the administration requested. Winslow Wheeler of the Center for Defense Information says the 181 votes in favor of limiting the defense increase to \$8.5 billion were far more than such a proposal would have gotten at any time in recent years. Those favoring a less generous approach "do not yet have a majority



in the House," he says, "but that is the direction of the momentum."

Amid the intense pressures now on Congress and the president to bring spending under control, there will probably be more and more members, in both parties, willing to make that choice. It's always been clear that we can't afford to spend too little on defense. It's now obvious that we also can't afford to spend too much.

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