

## Room for Debate: A Running Commentary on the News

« Room for Debate Home

« Back to Discussion

### How to Cut the Military

The defense budget has risen by 70 percent in the last decade. Is it time to slash it?

#### More Spending, Less Security

Updated May 9, 2011, 11:22 AM

*Benjamin H. Friedman is a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the Cato Institute.*

Responsibly cutting military spending requires restraining the ambitions it serves. We spend too much on defense because we choose too little. We confuse security needs with global ambition and military prowess with the power to reform the planet.

There are two flawed ways to shrink the Pentagon. One is efficiency: pursuing the same objectives at less cost. Secretary Gates' attack on the Pentagon's administrative costs shows how little this method yields. The efficiency "savings" he would return to the Treasury are roughly 2 percent of planned spending and merely slow defense spending growth.

"Efficiency" savings and 1990s-style across-the-board cuts are flawed ways to shrink the Pentagon.

The second is the Nike way; just doing it and expecting cuts to cause efficiency and prioritization among objectives. The 1990s peace dividend, which merely reversed the Reagan buildup, cautions against this tack. The Pentagon distributed the pain equally across the services, avoiding hard choices. Worse, presidents used the shrunken force promiscuously. That overburdened the troops, generating pressure to spend more.

The United States, 5 percent of the globe's population, now accounts for half its military spending. The cause is not our enemies, who are weak and scattered by historical standards. Power, instead, tempts us to meddle and boss, distributing forces and promises willy-nilly. Playing global sheriff injects us into conflicts, stokes resentment and spawns dependents that accept military subsidies but resist advice.

A more modest defense strategy would increase security and cut debt. If we let rich allies defend themselves and admitted that we lack the ability to fix disorderly states, we could have a smaller, more elite, less strained, and far less expensive military. With fewer missions, we could cut force structure, slash administration and lower operational costs.

The biggest savings should come from the ground forces. To occupy Iraq and Afghanistan, we added almost 100,000 service-members to the Army and Marine Corps. Meanwhile, the flow of American blood and treasure meant to prop up those venal governments cured most Americans of their infatuation with counterinsurgency. Counterterrorism, as last week's events remind us, does not require occupational warfare. With raids and drones we can deny terrorists safe havens without trying to build states from chaos.

If we avoid repeating that mistake after the wars end, the ground forces will have far less to do. Their ranks could shrink by at least a third, saving upward of \$30 billion annually. By embracing our geopolitical fortune, rather than going out looking for trouble, we can protect ourselves at far lower cost.

*Join Room for Debate on Facebook and follow updates on [twitter.com/roomfordebate](http://twitter.com/roomfordebate).*

Topics: Military, Politics, World, budgets and budgeting