

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

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## Phony Defense Spending Cuts

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| August 17, 2010

| [Benjamin H. Friedman](#) <sup>[2]</sup>



If you decide, in winter, to cut your cable bill by \$30 to help defray a \$50 increase in your monthly heating bill, have you cut household expenses? No, you have shifted expenses around. You can accurately say that you cut spending on cable or even that you are spending more efficiently, but not that you cut household spending.

That logic escaped much of the national media late last week after the Secretary of Defense announced a plan to close the Joint Forces Command, hire less contractors in the Pentagon, and cut down on the number of generals and civilians it employs. The proposals are part of a larger plan to shift spending from administrative overhead to force structure. The Secretary is [clear](#) <sup>[3]</sup> about that and his hope that overall defense spending continues to rise, as it has every year [since 1997](#) <sup>[4]</sup>. The Secretary even [says](#) <sup>[5]</sup> that he hopes that these proposals will deflect political pressure for real defense budget cuts. But headline after headline refers to the changes as spending cuts.

Here are some prominent examples:

*Boston Globe*: [Gates Announces Major Cuts in Military Spending](#) <sup>[6]</sup>

*New York Times*: [Pentagon Plans Steps to Reduce Budget and Jobs](#) [7]

*Fox*: [Lawmakers Question Gates Defense Cuts in Face of 'Growing Threats'](#) [8]

*The Hill*: [Va. lawmakers blast Defense cuts](#) [9]

To be fair, once you get past the inaccurate headlines, these articles all point out, albeit sometimes vaguely, that what's going on here is cost shifting, not cost saving.

The real prize for inaccuracy, however, goes to the *Washington Post*, which published on Friday both an [op-ed](#) [10] by David Broder and [editorial](#) [11] applauding Secretary Gates for nonexistent budget cuts.

The Post kindly published a [letter](#) [12] I wrote asking them to stop confusing reforms explicitly intended to prevent spending cuts with actual spending cuts. Ironically, however, the title that they gave my letter—both [online](#) [12] (“Will the defense cuts do what Robert Gates says they will?”) and in the actual newspaper (“Scrutinizing Mr. Gates's Defense Budget Cuts”)—repeated the error I was complaining about.

Then you have the *Washington Independent's* Annie Lowrey, who wrote [two](#) [13] [articles](#) [14] last week claiming not only that the reforms announced last week would cut Pentagon spending, but that they would cut it by \$100 billion over five years. However, as the *Wall Street Journal* article Lowrey cites a source for this figure (which is the Pentagon's [estimate](#) [15]) notes, the reforms announced last week will not trim administrative spending by anything approaching \$100 billion. They are part of a larger plan intended to do so.

I know that my instructions for the media on how to cover defense are about as effective as my instructions to the Red Sox on choosing next year's fifth [starter](#) [16]. But it makes me feel better. So I will add that reporters ought to ask experts how much money Gates's initiatives are [really likely to save](#) [17]. They might find that fiscal austerity and world domination are [incompatible](#) [18].

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[1] <http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=nationalinterest>

[2] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/benjamin-h-friedman>

[3] <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/2010/08/10/bob-gates-against-the-world/>

[4] <http://pileusblog.wordpress.com/2010/06/09/national-defense-spending-1998-2011/>

[5] <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4731225>

[6] [http://www.boston.com/.../gates\\_announces\\_major\\_cuts\\_in\\_military\\_spending/](http://www.boston.com/.../gates_announces_major_cuts_in_military_spending/)

[7] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/10/us/10gates.html>

[8] <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2010/08/11/lawmakers-question-gates-defense-cuts-face-growing-threats/>

[9] <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/113715-spending-cuts-at-pentagon-draw-fire-from-many-in-congress>

[10] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/11/AR2010081104746.html>

[11] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/11/AR2010081105285.html>

[12] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/13/AR2010081305913.html>

[13] <http://washingtonindependent.com/94242/preempting-washington-gates-cuts-pentagon-budget>

[14] <http://washingtonindependent.com/94686/house-starts-push-back-on-defense-spending-cuts>

[15] <http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0610/060410cdpm1.htm>

[16] <http://sonsofsimmons.com/mlb/red-sox-re-sign-jonathan-papelbon/2009/>

[17] [http://www.politico.com/static/PPM152\\_100812\\_crsmemo.html](http://www.politico.com/static/PPM152_100812_crsmemo.html)

[18] <http://www.cato.org/testimony/ct-bf-07202010.html>