

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Questions for the next Commander-In-Chief

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September 7, 2016

Tonight's Commander-in-Chief forum, co-sponsored by NBC and **Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA)**, offers one of the few opportunities thus far to hear the presidential candidates discuss their views on national security issues in depth. Each candidate will have a half hour, back-to-back, which should provide enough time to ferret out substantive differences. It's not enough to say "I'll keep America safe," or "I'll make our military so strong no one will challenge us." Specifics matter.

Unfortunately, one specific we have already heard from both candidates is cause for deep concern. In the past several days, both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton have pledged to undo spending caps currently in place at the Pentagon, promising to shovel unknown billions back into the **largest line item** in America's discretionary budget.

These calls for more spending are based on some highly dubious claims and are worth a serious fact check.

First, let's start with the notion that under President Obama, the military has seen its budget dramatically slashed, resulting in poverty at the Pentagon.

The Obama administration has spent more on the Pentagon than George W. Bush did, and current levels **exceed** the peak year of the Reagan administration. That's a pile of money, any way you examine it. What reductions have occurred are due overwhelmingly to the decline in costs associated with bringing home nearly all American troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Fighting wars costs lots of money, particularly when they involve large deployments of ground combat troops. The current fighting in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, and the small force remaining in Afghanistan cost a small fraction of what America spent in Iraq and Afghanistan a decade ago. That is why the budget went down. Even if one ignores the reality of why the budget has gone down, it is also worth noting that the drawdown in the budget following the end of the wars in Iraq and scaling down in Afghanistan is, by historical standards, quite small.

But one might still argue, as the candidates have, that even though the previous wars that drove our record spending spree at the Pentagon have ended, new threats and missions require us to return to record spending, even if we're not going to send 100,000 of our troops back into combat.

The truth is, it's hard to argue with a straight face that the current \$600 billion-plus allocated to the Pentagon and related agencies is somehow not enough to protect the U.S. and its allies. In fact, as Benjamin Friedman of the Cato Institute notes in a new piece for War on the Rocks, a more restrained defense strategy would allow reductions from current levels of Pentagon spending without jeopardizing our security. Elements of such an approach would include limiting the military to tasks it is actually designed to do and putting aside the goal of addressing every contingency on the planet, large or small, by relying on allies to do more in their own defense.

Friedman puts current Pentagon spending in perspective by noting that the United States spends twice as much as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea combined. He suggests that a more focused strategy that sets real priorities could save up to 25% in Pentagon spending from current levels, phased in over time. Even if one disagrees with some of Friedman's specific suggested changes in procurement and force structure, his essay makes clear that we need to craft a better strategy, and that doing so could save tens of billions of dollars per year from current levels.

Simply put, spending more money isn't in itself a strategy.

Instead of simply throwing money at a massively bloated bureaucracy, it would be nice to see the candidates show some leadership and talk about the tough choices they would make as Commander-in-Chief. What fat would they cut from the Pentagon's bloated budget?

While honing the U.S. military's missions would yield the biggest savings, there are plenty of other programs that should be eliminated or scaled back. First among these is the overpriced, underperforming, and unnecessary F-35 combat aircraft. Under the Pentagon's current plans, the F-35 will be the most expensive weapons program ever undertaken by the Pentagon, at a cool \$1.4 trillion over its lifetime. All of this for a plane that does not perform well as a fighter or a bomber, and that is so complex that half the force may be grounded for maintenance at any one time.

Another major expenditure that is both wasteful and dangerous is the plan to buy a new generation of nuclear-armed missiles, bombers and submarines at an estimated cost of \$1 trillion or more over the next three decades. And the costs keep growing. Just this week Bloomberg News reported that procurement of a new land-based missile alone could cost \$85 billion, a much higher figure than the Pentagon or the Air Force had admitted before.

The United States has thousands of nuclear warheads at time when independent experts, including retired military leaders, have suggested that hundreds will be enough to dissuade any other country from attacking the United States. Current delivery vehicles can be modified so that they will work for many decades to come, undercutting the rationale for the \$1 trillion buildup. A

good place to start would be by cutting the proposed nuclear-armed cruise missile, which former Secretary of Defense William Perry has **described** as “dangerous and destabilizing.”

Beyond planes that don't work and bombs we don't need, the candidates could look at the rampant waste at the Pentagon.

A new **report** by the Pentagon's Inspector General revealed that Pentagon officials had used government-issued credit cards to spend over \$1 million at casinos and strip clubs. This is small change by Pentagon standards, but it is a sign of how poorly the department keeps track of the public's money. A February 2106 **report** by the Center for International Policy's William D. Hartung, the co-author of this piece, identified 27 examples of Pentagon waste that cost taxpayers \$33 billion, from multi-billion dollar air surveillance balloons that can't stay airborne to \$150 million villas for a handful of civilian personnel in Afghanistan.

While we're looking forward to what the candidates say tonight, the bottom line is the next Commander in Chief, needs to acknowledge taxpayers aren't getting their money's worth for defense - not by a long shot. An unrealistic strategy, poor procurement choices, and bad management practices are all to blame, not to mention lobbying by profit-hungry contractors. The next Commander-in-Chief should be required to provide clear, specific answers about how they will clean up the mess at the Pentagon. The Pentagon does not need more money - it needs to stop wasting the hundreds of billions a dollars a year it already gets.