

Republican Calls to Drain the Pentagon Swamp Provide Window for Democrats to Climb Through

By Peter Certo, February 2, 2011



(Pictured: Grover Norquist.)

Of all the changes one can expect to see in Washington this year, at least one might be welcome. “Divisions have opened among Republicans,” [reports](#) the *New York Times*, “about whether, and how much, to chop Pentagon spending that comes to more than a half trillion dollars a year.”

Irked by an agreement between the Pentagon and President Obama to trim the growth in Pentagon spending by \$78 billion over the next five years, Rep. Howard McKeon (R-CA) has announced that he “will not support any measures that stress our forces and jeopardize the lives of our men and women in uniform.” Perhaps not coincidentally, the *Times* also reports that Rep. McKeon was “the single biggest recipient in the House of campaign contributions from military aerospace companies and their employees” during the 2010 campaign.

In any case, McKeon has encountered an intra-party resistance to his posturing that might have been unthinkable as recently as one Congress ago. Some freshman Tea Party Republicans, notably retired Army colonel Rep. Charles Gibson of New York, have

insisted that the defense budget should be no more immune to the austerity fever sweeping through Washington than any other federal department. In word if not yet in deed, they are joined by Reps. John Boehner and Eric Cantor, traditionally pro-military members of the Republican leadership.

The debate is almost entirely over deficits, and it frequently includes unfortunate detours into cries for draconian service and entitlement cuts. But it is a healthy one.

I recently attended a CATO Capitol Hill briefing on the subject of the 112th Congress and the military budget. Sitting under-dressed in a well adorned room full of Blackberry-toting Hill aides, it was easy enough to feel uncomfortable. But the substance of the speakers' remarks -- the need for deep cuts to the military budget and an accompanying strategic adjustment of just how we expect to use our armed forces -- was enough to make one feel right at home.

CATO scholars Benjamin Friedman and Chris Preble discussed recommendations from their 2010 report "[Budgetary Savings from Military Restraint](#)," in which they outline more than \$1 trillion worth of cuts over the next years. Friedman noted that there are three ways to seek cuts in military spending.

The first way is to identify those ubiquitous "efficiencies," i.e., cutting a handful of needless procurements to reinvest money in "boots on the ground." This is the preferred approach of Robert Gates and indeed receives a great deal of bipartisan lip service -- which is precisely why it is least likely to be effective. Such an approach is merely a bureaucratic contrivance to stave off more meaningful cuts.

The second way is what Friedman calls the "Nike" approach: just do it. We might look upon President Obama's proposed \$78 billion in diminished growth as following this tack: if cuts are imposed, the armed services will simply have to identify their true priorities. Austerity is, after all, a fine auditor.

But the only truly effective way to achieve meaningful spending reductions, and the way advocated by Friedman and Preble, is to advocate a more restrained foreign policy. They

note the [litany of expectations](#) that American policymakers have of the armed forces: “containing” China, building democracies in failed states (not to mention toppling them in the first place), providing for defense commitments to economically developed states in Western Europe and Northeast Asia, protecting sea lanes, and so forth.

Friedman and Preble posit that if we were to reevaluate what was actually necessary for a secure country, even one that remains very much engaged with the international community, we could very well determine that most of these undertakings are unnecessary, and -- though they didn't use the word -- imperial. Our delusions of grandeur have become shockingly expensive in recent decades, and taxpayer-funded power projection no longer seems like a sustainable investment.

Also speaking at the event was the famed (and perhaps notorious) tax reform advocate Grover Norquist. Though Norquist devoted a sizable portion of his remarks to off-hand deadpanning about “liberals” and “the left,” he eventually made his way toward an incredibly salient point: in order to achieve serious progress toward cutting the military budget, such a conversation needs to penetrate into Republican circles.

Citing the unfortunate but not altogether inaccurate perception that so-called “moderate” voters are more inclined to take Republicans seriously on national security matters than Democrats, Norquist argued that Democrats have failed to tackle defense spending precisely because they fear Republican attacks on the issue. Implicitly, in order for Democrats to get serious about slashing the Pentagon budget, they need to be provided the space afforded by a real Republican debate on the subject. And that is what may finally be happening, even if it looks a tad like a circus.

What regrettable moments we might avoid if future Democrats actually perceive this space! No more Hillary Clintons casting cynical votes to authorize wars of aggression. No more John Kerrys complementing “anti-war” platforms with calls to increase force strength. No more awkward after-the-fact arguments from progressives about how we should have had more troops, better equipment, an actual exit strategy, a more battle-ready military, or whatever other inane thing. Maybe next time they'll just say NO.

So, Democrats, be advised: Republicans are having this discussion, and some of them may even be more serious about it than you are. In an age where bipartisan consensus dwells chiefly in federal pay freezes and corporate tax cuts, it's refreshing to note that a credible left-right nexus exists on the imperative of draining the Pentagon swamp. Moreover, this nexus lies not only in reducing the deficit but, somewhere at least, in reining in an imperial war machine that threatens our democracy and imperils the planet.