

Cuts in defense must be on table

Jacob Sullum jsullum@reason.com Feb 2, 2011 2:40AM

Vicky Hartzler, a freshman representative from Missouri, says one of her top priorities is “reining in runaway spending.” Yet she exempts one-fifth of the federal budget and more than half of discretionary spending from scrutiny.

“Now is not the time to talk about defense cuts while we are engaged in two theaters with men and women in harm’s way,” Hartzler recently told the New York Times. For Hartzler and too many of her fellow Republicans, it’s never time to talk about defense cuts. This irrational attitude, the flip side of automatic progressive resistance to reductions in social spending, must be disavowed by anyone who is serious about dealing with the nation’s fiscal crisis.

There is a grain of truth at the heart of the sense that defense spending is special. Unlike so much of what the federal government does, maintaining an army and navy is explicitly authorized by the Constitution, and with good reason: Providing for the common defense is a central function of government.

But that does not mean anything labeled “defense” should get a free pass. Consider the two wars Hartzler mentioned, which so far have cost something like \$1.3 trillion, not to mention thousands of lives. Is forcibly replacing dictatorships with liberal democracies a sensible, cost-effective way to protect Americans from foreign invaders? If not, Hartzler is citing an egregious waste of money and lives in the name of defense as a reason not to cut military spending.

A view of defense that requires reshaping the world in America’s image is a blank check for the Pentagon. If it justifies \$700 billion a year — about as much as the military spending of all other nations combined — why not twice or three times that amount? There will always be another hostile regime to replace or failed state to rebuild.

If conservatives applied to military spending the same skepticism they bring to misbegotten or obsolete domestic programs, they would ask whether making the world safe through democracy is a viable defense strategy. They might also wonder why we have 47,000 military personnel in Japan 66 years after the end of World War II, 28,500 in South Korea 58 years after its war with the North ended, and more than 80,000 in Europe 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These affluent countries are perfectly capable of defending themselves from whatever threats they still face.

“The Pentagon presently spends more in constant dollars than it did at any time during the Cold War,” notes Andrew Bacevich, a professor of international relations at Boston University. Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), whose proposal for reducing this year’s federal spending by \$500 billion includes \$48 billion in defense cuts, notes that “military expenditure has increased by nearly 120 percent” since 2001.

In a 2010 Cato Institute paper, Benjamin Friedman and Christopher Preble calculate that a narrower understanding of national defense — one that does not require the U.S. to police the world — would allow savings of at least \$1.2 trillion over 10 years. “We spend too much because we choose too little,” they write. “The United States needs a defense budget worthy of its name, one that protects Americans rather than wasting vast sums embroiling us in controversies remote from our interests.”

Although House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) do not go nearly that far, they do at least agree that military spending should not be immune from cuts. Even that is too much for House Armed Services Committee Chairman Howard McKeon (R-Calif.), who insists “we need the defense budget close to where it is” — especially the part that pays defense contractors in his district.

Despite her avowed concern about “runaway spending,” Hartzler is likewise keen to protect the defense dollars that benefit her constituents. “I will be a staunch defender of military installations in my district and across the country,” she told the Times. Apparently, defense spending is so holy that it makes pork kosher.