

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Solving the Fiscal Impasse Starts and Ends at the Pentagon

By: Barbara Lee – January 9th, 2013

As Afghan President Hamid Karzai returns to the United States this week, he will meet President Barack Obama at a time when the overwhelming majority of the American people and a strong bipartisan coalition of Congress believe it is long past time to bring the war to a safe and expedited close. Most Americans realize that instead of spending billions of dollars extending our military presence in Afghanistan, we need to commit to a political settlement, bring all of our troops safely home and invest in jobs as well as nation-building here at home.

Yet for too long, we have given the Pentagon blank checks while neglecting our crumbling roads, our aging water systems and our struggling schools. From 2000 to 2010, overall spending on the base defense budget rose from nearly \$300 billion to \$700 billion. That massive increase in spending, combined with \$1.4 trillion (and counting) spent on two wars, and the projected hundreds of billions in costs to care for our returning veterans, were all committed even as we passed tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans. This is an unprecedented and disastrous policy course that led directly to the debt problem we have today.

After a decade of tax giveaways and extravagant defense spending, Congress has passed more than \$1.7 trillion in spending cuts to critical domestic programs on which all American families rely. Most of this came in the summer of 2011 as part of a deal to raise the debt ceiling without any revenue. Now, with the fiscal cliff deal behind us, the coming weeks will bring even more heated debate surrounding our budget, across-the-board cuts called sequestration and how to continue growing our economy by protecting the American dream for all. Here is what we should do:

Brings our troops home: Last month, almost 100 bipartisan members of the House of Representatives joined me and the overwhelming majority of the American people in reaffirming our strong conviction to bring the war in Afghanistan to a safe and expedited close. It is long past time to hand over security responsibility to the Afghans and ensure a seamless transition for our brave troops from active duty to civilian life. Doing so would save tens of billions of dollars this year alone.

Focus on job creation: The poor and middle class already bear a disproportionate share of the nation's economic pain. Taking into account what was passed into law as part of the fiscal cliff deal, a fiscally responsible and balanced approach would secure an additional \$1 trillion in new revenue to match the massive cuts to domestic programs we have already made in recent months. Doing so would allow us to make robust investments in smart and targeted economic growth, provide a 21st-century education

for every child in America and create a renewable green energy technology future that will end our dependence on foreign oil, protect our environment and kick-start a new manufacturing base here in America. After all, the best way to reduce our deficit is to focus on job creation here at home.

Achieve sensible cuts to out-of-control Pentagon spending: In 2011, the U.S. government spent about \$718 billion on defense and international security assistance -- more than it spent on Medicare and more than the next 13 nations spent on defense combined, including China, Russia, the United Kingdom and France. There are many proposals from a wide variety of groups from across the political spectrum that detail defense savings on par with or beyond the cuts called for under the sequestration portion of the Budget Control Act of 2011. The Project on Defense Alternatives, CATO Institute, Taxpayers for Common Sense, Center for American Progress and Bowles-Simpson Commission have all called for deep cuts in defense spending ranging from \$350 billion to \$590 billion beyond the cuts already in place. Making sensible cuts would help create a cost-effective military aligned with 21st-century threats.

Audit the Pentagon: Financial responsibility must not stop at the doors of the Pentagon. Almost 60 cents of every federal discretionary dollar now goes toward defense spending. By the Pentagon's own admission, it cannot properly account for how the money is spent. There is no doubt these circumstances have contributed to instances of waste, fraud and abuse at the Pentagon. We must stop the culture of reckless spending at the Pentagon by demanding that every program at the Defense Department pass independent audits.

Securing new revenue as well as achieving significant cuts to and transparency in defense spending, while also ending the war in Afghanistan, will prevent the fiscal burden from being shifted onto the backs of poor and working families or making unnecessary benefit cuts to Medicare, Medicaid or Social Security. Our priority right now must be jobs to build up our economic strength and lift millions out of poverty, the true measure of our nation's security.