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Local View: To balance the budget, look at defense spending

By Robert Haller and John Krejci March 19, 2013

The members of the United Nations Association in Nebraska, like most Americans, are concerned for the security and leadership standing of our country. They see our mounting debt, and the huge military outlays contributing to that debt, as major long-term contributors to U.S. insecurity.

We have therefore resolved to urge our congressional delegation to reconsider the strategy that keeps the defense budget so high. Our enemies in al-Qaida must be pleased that their attack pushed us into wars and a continuous military build-up, which endangers our financial security and shows us a nation afraid to face the rest of the world unless armed to take on all comers.

While defense spending grows, the State Department's budget for international engagement and foreign aid is tiny in comparison, although peace keeping operations, defense of human rights and fighting disease and poverty surely serve our long-term interests more than a continuous military engagement.

The end of the war in Iraq and troop reductions in Afghanistan, coinciding with a desperate need to balance the budget, provides us with an opportunity to rethink the part that military power should have in our security strategy. The sequester is not a rethinking. Starting with a focus on support for an international collaborative effort to fight terrorism, keep trade open, render ineffective destabilizing insurgencies by terrorist groups and protect people against rulers who kill their own citizens, we should reject a focus on land wars and weapons of mass destructions.

We should be appalled by the real size of the defense budget. The Pentagon base budget, now \$558 billion (doubled what it was before 9/11) does not include the cost of the war in Afghanistan (\$118 billion), nor nuclear weapons related activities, Homeland Security, foreign and domestic intelligence, veterans' pensions, medical and educational benefits, counterterrorism money hidden in the budget and interest on the war debt.

We should ask ourselves whether spending such a large portion of our budget on defense reflects our basic values. Why not listen to those across the spectrum of American ideology, such as the Cato Institute, which has articulated the principle that “Our national defense and security strategy (should be) appropriate for a constitutional republic not an empire.” We should reject appeals not related to our security, such as the idea that the defense budget creates jobs. Investment in research, infrastructure, education and energy creates jobs and contributes to our well-being and economy.

There are those who try to frighten us by saying cuts in the defense budget weaken us. If enough of us have confidence in American support of human rights and development, and the power of our economic and military superiority to make us the acknowledged leader, we can balance our budget and secure our future without sacrificing our present and future well-being.

We hope to find others willing to urge Congress to rethink budget priorities in this manner.