

LANCASTER NEW ERA

Downsize the empire

By: Gil Smart – March 3, 2013

American money in America, for Americans.

In any discussion of the need to cut spending — that's where we must start.

I'm not talking foreign aid *per se*. I'm talking the empire, and the need to downsize it.

What's that, you say? America doesn't have an empire? Why do you think that — because we don't declare it as such?

The late analyst Chalmers Johnson in 2009 estimated that the U.S. maintains 800 military bases in other countries, costing more than \$100 billion annually. This isn't a Republican or Democrat thing; you might have seen that President Obama last month sent 100 American troops to Niger to set up a base for drones to conduct surveillance in nearby Mali. In order to — of course — "combat the spread of al-Qaida."

So what's this going to cost? Or is the question verboten because al-Qaida is so terrible and frightening?

Enough.

American defense spending is extraordinary by any measure — and totals far more than you think. According to David Cay Johnston at the Columbia Journalism Review, the oft-quoted figure — \$525 billion in defense spending for fiscal year 2013 — is less than half what we'll actually spend on "national security."

For example, Homeland Security costs (\$13.2 billion in FY 2013) and intelligence costs (totaling \$71.8 billion) aren't included in that \$525 billion "base" figure. Neither is the price we're still paying for past wars; Veterans Affairs will spend some \$139 billion in FY 2013.

Once upon a time we raised taxes to fight wars, but Iraq and Afghanistan have been debt-financed. So, to get an accurate figure for "defense," we ought to add in interest costs.

All told, wrote Johnston, our "national security" budget comes to \$1.3 trillion.

This, of course, is more than the other top 10 countries combined. It's an insane figure — but one that many Americans firmly believe necessary so we can be "safe."

Americans once knew we didn't need all this to be safe. "What business is it of ours whether Russia or Germany or England or France or Italy or Austria live under democracies or monarchies? Whether they are Fascists or Communists? Our problem is to preserve our own democracy," Maj. Gen. Smedley Butler wrote in his famous 1935 essay "War Is a Racket." At the time of his death, Butler was the most decorated Marine in U.S. history.

Now we deem "exporting democracy" essential for our own freedom. But we can't afford this any longer.

If we're going to "nation build," we must build this nation first. Every dollar cut from welfare spending so we can establish bases in places like Niger or wage war in places like Libya is a dollar stolen from the American public.

So, how do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

In 2011, military analyst Thomas Barnett, noting that expensive manned aircraft are being replaced by drones, told Time magazine that smaller, less expensive carriers may be the wave of the future. Our existing carrier fleet could be reduced, Time's Mark Thomas wrote. But there's more:

"The annual purchase of two \$3 billion attack submarines to maintain a 48 sub fleet as far as the periscope can see also could be scaled back," Thomas wrote. "The \$383 billion F-35 program really isn't required when U.S. warplanes remain the world's best and can be retooled with new engines and electronics to keep them that way. Reagan-era missile defenses and the nuclear arsenal are largely Cold War relics with little relevance today. Altogether, Congress could save close to \$500 billion by smartly scaling back procurement over the next decade."

Thomas also noted that there are 17 different agencies generating so much intelligence for the U.S. that much of it can't be reviewed. He cites a study by the libertarian Cato Institute estimating that "scaling back collection and analysis to what's vital — as opposed to what is possible — could cut military intelligence budgets by more than \$100 billion in the next 10 years."

These are starting points, but not end points. For if the country is broke or near-broke, as conservatives aver — and I largely agree — then we face a vital decision. What's more important — drones over Mali, or the health and welfare of Americans here in America?

Ultimately, we'll have to choose. And that choice will dictate the kind of country we become.