

Analysts Call for More 'Honesty' in Defense Budget Debate

by Sandra Erwin

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Military spending cuts are necessary to help balance the federal budget... Axing the Pentagon's budget will gut the U.S. military and weaken the nation... Cutting defense ensures that China will take over as the world's superpower... Social programs, not military spending, are to blame for the nation's crushing debt...

When it comes to the defense budget, there are enough conflicting bumper stickers and catch phrases to make one's head spin. And therein lies the problem, a panel of military analysts concurred. At a time when the United States faces soaring budget deficits, military spending has turned into a political football.

Since Congress passed deficit-reduction legislation in August that calls for reduced defense spending, rhetorical bombs have been lobbed nonstop inside the Beltway. Pro-defense interest groups and allied lawmakers are fighting back against any cuts. Fiscal hawks and supporters of a smaller military continue to argue for restraint and responsible spending.

Amid the breathless arguments, there are key questions that nobody has yet answered: In the post-Iraq and post-Afghanistan era, how large should the U.S. military be, and how much money should the nation invest in its security?

Discussions about defense spending, regrettably, have not been objective debates, lamented a panel of experts Sept. 29 during a Center for Strategic and International Studies conference titled, coincidentally, "Defense in an Age of Austerity."

"We are not having an honest debate about defense," said James Jay Carafano, a policy analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation.

Although members of Congress have been guilty of over-politicizing the defense budget, it is the Obama administration that is to blame for the absence of a forward-looking national security strategy that would help frame the debate, said Carafano.

"It's a completely dishonest debate and that is why it has been hard for members of Congress to grapple with this," he said. The Pentagon has not articulated what it foresees as its future missions and what resources might be required to execute them, said Carafano. That analytical void only exacerbates the demagoguery, he added. "The administration talks about a roles and missions study. I'm really excited to see what it says. And to see the analytics are behind it."

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta is expected to unveil next month the results of a comprehensive strategic review that should inform Congress what risks might be associated with cuts to military spending.

But even after that review is aired, there is no certainty that it will lead to a reasonable, facts-based discussion of how much the nation should spend on defense, analysts predict.

In general, said Carafano, defense planning is "not honest. It's a kabuki dance." The Pentagon favors "threats based" planning that allows officials to "cook the books to create the threats to justify the forces that we want," he said. There is also "capabilities-based planning" which is mostly marketing to justify weapons systems the Pentagon wants to buy. With the current levels of defense spending, the nation can afford a strong military that can "prevent World War III and protect U.S. interests," said Carafano.

Christopher A. Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian CATO Institute agreed that misinformation is getting in the way of a productive discussion on how to reprioritize military spending. There is much misunderstanding in the public about the true costs of U.S. defense policy, he said. Part of the reason is that people are ruled by fear. Defense strategic planning tends to be based on worst-case

scenarios, Preble said. "Every potential ethnic conflict is a future Rwanda in the making. Every tin pot tyrant with a megaphone is the next Adolf Hitler. If any of those predictions were true, it would be a really frightening world. ... We need to draw a distinction between [a real threat] and a ranting lunatic like Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad whose military budget is 177th of what the United States spends," said Preble. "Stop scaring the American people."

If it ends up that Americans have to endure cuts to retirement or health benefits, they might begin to question why they are being saddled with an expensive military, he said. The United States has to begin to scale back its military commitments, he said. "We need a leaner, more focused military."

Also adding to the confusion in the current debate is that the August debt deal only calls for modest cuts, said Preble. "Today in inflation adjusted dollars we spend more on national security than at any time since the end of World War II." The projected cuts, by most people's definition, do not qualify as austerity, he said. "When we talk about cuts we need to put that on the table."

Only in Washington, D.C., could some of the cuts that are being contemplated — less than one percent between 2011 and 2012 — be called an "age of austerity," said Frank G. Hoffman, director of the National Defense University Press.

Outside the Beltway, where people are living with 14 percent unemployment, this alarmist rhetoric would be laughable, he said. The facts are the facts, he added. "We are outspending the rest of the world on defense. We are outspending any combination of rivals by a factor of three. ... We don't need to spend more than we spent during the Cold War. I don't see those threats out there," he said. "We have to be honest about that."

Even the worst-case scenario, which would call for defense budget reductions of 8-10 percent over the next decade, would be reasonable, he said. That is only half of what was trimmed in previous post-war military build-downs, he said.

While national security is a sacrosanct concern, it cannot be denied that it is contributing to the rising debt, Hoffman noted. "We borrow \$200 billion a year for defense," he said. "The idea that defense is immaterial to the deficit is something we have to be honest about. ... Two trillion of our debt went into defense," he said. "We are not in a crisis, we are not in an age of austerity." What the nation is presented with is a "wonderful opportunity for strategic readjustment."

Carafano does not expect misinformation to go away any time soon, at least until after the 2012 elections. "The truth is in the next two years I don't think we are going to have an honest public debate about defense."

The larger problem, however, may not just be the elections, but the inherently greedy component of human nature. The money in defense is so big that it creates incentives to twist facts and manipulate public opinion, said Moisés Naím, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Policy makers may not be morally questionable, but the system in place today offers too many incentives to inflate the nation's real security needs. "Too many careers, money, companies are on the line," Naím said. "If you put hard budget constraints, you would change incentives."