

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

The Great Debate

Christopher A. Preble | October 23, 2012

Table of Contents

Geoffrey Kemp

Dov S. Zakheim

Matthew Rojansky

Amitai Etzioni

Robert Keatley

Christopher A. Preble

John Quiggin

The most telling moment of the debate might have been Romney's inability to answer a basic question about his plans for military spending.

He surely must have known that such a question was likely. There have been a number of [recent articles](#) about his promise to spend at least 4 percent of GDP on the Pentagon's base budget, first articulated in a [defense and foreign-policy white paper](#) and reiterated [on his website](#). Moderator Bob Schieffer asked, not unreasonably, "Governor . . . Where are you going to get the money?"

Romney replied that "we're going to cut about 5 percent from the discretionary budget, excluding military," and he invited Schieffer to "come on our website" to see "how we get to a balanced budget within 8 to 10 years."

But Romney's numbers don't add up. According to the CBO's latest [projections](#) (Table 1-3), nondefense discretionary spending over the next decade (2013–2022) will total \$5.494 trillion. Five percent of that equals \$274.7 billion. Sequestration would eliminate another \$356 billion, assuming that he could push those cuts through Congress while protecting the Pentagon. According to [my most conservative estimate](#), Romney's 4 percent goal, assuming that he won't actually reach it until the end of a second term, will generate \$1.7 trillion in additional spending. Cutting domestic discretionary spending, therefore, doesn't come close to covering the costs of Romney's plans. So, I ask, "Governor, where are you going to get the money?"

But perhaps we were witnessing another [Etch A Sketch moment](#)? Romney said last night that he would not cut military spending, but he did not reiterate his 4 percent goal. Could it be that Romney is moving away from it?

One can only hope. It was [never smart to peg military spending to GDP](#), and it was doubly foolish to pick an arbitrary number so completely oblivious to fiscal reality.

Christopher Preble is vice president for defense and foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute and the author of The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free.