

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Why Defense Debates Are Unbalanced

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A reporter asked me the other day why my side of the military budget debate—for slashing spending—has been quiet lately. Given that I have been spending too much time making [3] such [4] arguments [5], I was slightly annoyed. The conversation was a useful reminder that most people, even reporters and policy wonks, do not think about how the debate about defense favors the status quo. People assume that Beltway debates are broad, that the marketplace of ideas works, and that by reporting what happens in Congress, the Pentagon and think tanks, reporters give a fair sense of the issue.

They do not [6], and it's not really their fault. There is a two-part explanation. The first is the standard [7] collective-action story. Defense spending creates concentrated benefits and diffuse costs. Terms like “iron-triangle” or “military-industrial complex” are shorthand for its beneficiaries. Agencies get budget, contractors and districts get jobs, and their representative gets votes thanks to that spending. Ambition, funding and socialization tie [8] the [9] think tanks that one hears from most on defense to defense interests.

We all pay slightly higher taxes for excessive military spending but not enough to incentivize much organized resistance. So the opposition is weak: usually a smattering of libertarians, taxpayer advocates and the remnants of the antiwar movement. Those interests get juiced by wars, which greatly impact a minority of Americans, and by austerity, which makes military spending a threat to other concentrated interests, like lower taxes and growing entitlement spending.

But even today, wars touch [10] few Americans. And the Budget Control Act's spending caps have shaken [11] but not collapsed the compromise underlying the status quo of entitlement spending growth, military spending growth and current tax rates. The Tea Party movement has not [12] much eroded establishment

Republican support for the Pentagon. Democrats with power over military budgets remain unwilling [13] to sacrifice much of it for entitlements. So while the anti-military spending side has gained allies of late, it remains the weaker side.

The second part of the explanation is that unbalanced interests create [14] unbalanced debate. Journalists and editors claim to be watchdogs, but they remain too busy, dilettantish and dependent on official sources to much analyze official pronouncements on their own.

Institutionalized debate is what fuels [15] critical press coverage, and conflict among powerful interests brings that sort of debate. Hawks still dominate the official places where defense gets argued—the Pentagon, the relevant congressional committees, the think tanks favored by officialdom—so the debate that gets reported remains narrow.

A couple recent examples demonstrate the point. As Christopher Preble pointed out [16] the other day, both Pentagon and House Armed Services Committee leaders have [17] lately [18] substantiated their claims about job losses from Pentagon spending cuts with shoddy studies (actually, summaries of nonpublic studies). These assume that the money saved by cuts would disappear rather than get reinvested elsewhere and employ others. Indeed, because defense uses relatively little labor, most reinvestments of military spending, including tax cuts, are likely, over time, to increase demand for labor. A bevy of blog [19] posts [20] by people favoring military cuts got a [21] few [22] journalists [21] to question the official job-loss claims, but the majority of stories did not.

Or take military service chiefs' testimony [23] last week to the House Armed Services Committee. The gist is that sequestering \$600 billion from the Pentagon over ten years (more like \$500 billion, but who's counting?) would destroy the U.S. military. Leave aside for now the truth of that view, and consider its context. Here we have agency leaders defending their budgets with coordinated talking points in front of a committee run by members with districts dependent on military spending. The hearing, even more than most, is a performance intended to frighten Americans. Yet reporters, bound by tradition, cover it like a graduate seminar—where the end is truth. No witnesses noted that sequestration would merely return us to 2007 levels [24] of inflation-adjusted Pentagon spending (a time when, if memory serves, the military was doing OK), so no reporters did. The *Washington Post* even cut and pasted the chiefs' gory and largely inaccurate claims into an editorial.

I'm not begging for better reporting to balance debate and improve policy. More skeptical defense reporting would be terrific, but reporters, as I said, lack incentive to reliably provide it. What's needed, instead, are more mechanisms that concentrate defense spending costs on powerful interests and prompt policy fights, which in turn produce skepticism. Budget caps are a start, but more [25] can be done.