

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## Cut Defense Now, Change Strategy Later

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In an op-ed [3] published late last week by AOL Defense [4], Harvey Sapolsky and I argue that defense budget cuts shouldn't wait for new defense strategy. That is something of a reversal for me. I have [5] argued [6] that defense cuts should follow from a more restrained defense strategy. Harvey helped me realize that defense cuts are more likely to cause military restraint than the other way. Cuts should also produce efficiency in spending, as we note:

Austerity prioritizes better than strategists. With less money, military leaders will choose more carefully among programs, sacrificing less-favored missions and administrative bloat. The resulting bureaucratic fights will spill into Congress and out into the public, generating information about our defenses that civilians can use to make smarter choices about budgets and programs...The seeming chaos of four services and innumerable subcomponents brawling, compromising, failing and innovating is a better defense against uncertainty than the soundest plan.

One thing we don't discuss explicitly in the op-ed is the Pentagon strategy review, due early next year, which is supposed to guide defense budgeting. The Obama administration suggests that the review must guide any defense spending cuts. But Pentagon leaders have already made clear that they seek basically flat spending, a budget that grows only with inflation. They claim [7] that doing so saves upwards of \$400 billion because they previously planned to spend that much more over the next decade. Any additional cuts would be disastrous.

A point of the review is to justify that level of spending—to prevent real cuts. Because keeping current defense programs requires [8] substantial budget growth, leveled spending takes some programmatic sacrifice, and the review will likely recommend some. But alternatives that shed missions—like letting Europe shoulder its own defense—and save big bucks will be avoided. The review will resemble other strategy exercises, like the Quadrennial Defense Review [9], that protect the status quo rather than evaluate it. Those who want to let this review guide defense spending reductions are asking foxes to guard the henhouse.