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McCain Plays the Isolationist Card

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[Christopher A. Preble](#)^[2]



Predictably, John McCain [claims](#)^[3] that Republicans such as Senator-elect Rand Paul represent a wing of the party associated with protectionism and isolationism.

Sen. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma [is having none of it](#)^[4]. Good on him. McCain was castigating Paul, and by extension Coburn, for suggesting that military spending needs to be included in any deficit reduction plan. But McCain has it wrong. It is simply absurd to argue that military spending, which has grown by more than 86 percent in real terms since 1998, can and should be immune from scrutiny in an era of austerity. The name-calling might succeed in intimidating the less thoughtful or merely timid, but a few minutes with the actual numbers puts to bed the notion that military spending can and should be held sacrosanct.

But while all Members of Congress, egged on by the public, should be willing to shine the light on the Pentagon's procurement practices, and to ask hard questions about what is genuinely needed as opposed to merely desired, deeper cuts in military spending should be tied to a strategic outlook very different from that which has guided Washington for many years. My colleague Justin Logan [has](#)^[5] [elsewhere](#)^[6] [documented](#)^[7] the too-loose invocation of the loaded

term "isolationism" to describe a general approach to foreign policy that looks to most Americans like common sense. That alternative approach holds that countries are chiefly responsible for their own defense, that American taxpayers should not be expected to indefinitely shoulder the burdens of defending the entire world from all manner of threats, and that a smaller, more focused U.S. military would still provide Americans with a level of security that our ancestors would envy.

As Ben Friedman and I [have](#) [argued](#) [elsewhere](#) [\[10\]](#), a grand strategy of restraint would allow for a smaller Army and Marine Corps as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are drawn to a close (as they should be), deep cuts in the Pentagon's civilian work force, which has grown dramatically over the past 10 years, and sensible reductions in the nuclear arsenal. More modest cuts are warranted in intelligence and R&D. Finally, significant changes in a number of costly and unnecessary weapons and platforms, including terminating the V-22 Osprey and the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, and greater scrutiny of the F-35 program, for example, must also be in the mix. This Friday, Cato [will host a discussion of these issues at a public forum](#) [\[11\]](#) featuring Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) as well as the Lexington Institute's Loren Thompson.

But our proposal is hardly the only one in the mix. Last week, Erskine Bowles and Alan Simpson, the co-chairs of the president's debt reduction commission, [recommended](#) [\[12\]](#) cutting big-ticket procurement items, and backed some politically risky reforms in military compensation. All told, it was a noble effort. Still, the Bowles/Simpson proposals are too cautious and overly dependent upon [unrealistic expectations](#) [\[13\]](#) that Sec. Gates's proposed reforms will actually generate significant efficiency gains. Although they incorporated some of [proposals](#) [\[14\]](#) of the Sustainable Defense Task Force (or which I was a member), they failed to follow its lead in basing their cuts in a strategic rationale that allows cuts of force structure. Bowles-Simpson makes only glancing reference to strategic change and attempts to have the same military at less cost.

The Bipartisan Policy Center has [published](#) [\[15\]](#) a report by a task force chaired by former budget director Alice Rivlin and former Senator Pete Domenici. Its defense savings, [as discussed here by the analysts at the Stimson Center that helped prepare it](#) [\[16\]](#), are in the ballpark of Simpson-Bowles. Rivlin-Domenici, however, does much better in associating cuts with missions we can shed. Their recommendation to reduce military end-strength by 272,000 for example, is based first on the idea that strong allies and limited threats allow us to draw down in Europe and Asia, and second, on the judgment that recent experience makes it unlikely that we will soon undertake another open-ended counterinsurgency campaign.

Last but not least, the [Project on Defense Alternatives](#) [\[17\]](#) and the [Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy](#) [\[18\]](#) will release a joint letter signed by 46 (as of Wednesday morning) scholars and policy experts making the case that the Pentagon's budget can be cut without undermining U.S. security.

As it considers this swirl of proposals, Congress should keep in mind that serious cuts to military spending -- in other words, far deeper cuts than those proposed by Messrs. Bowles and Simpson last week, and Rivlin-Domenici today -- must be part of a broader strategic reset that ends the free-riding of wealthy and stable allies around the world, and that takes a more balanced and objective view of our relative strategic advantages and our enviable security.

Sen. McCain might call that isolationism. I'll call spending \$700 billion on the military so that our European allies can fund generous social welfare programs foreign aid.

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