

National Security Network

CONSERVATIVES CLASH OVER DEFENSE SPENDING

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Yesterday's Wall Street Journal op-ed by leaders of the top three conservative think tanks attempts to reimpose conservative orthodoxy on an issue - defense spending - that has sharply divided conservatives in recent months. Against the backdrop of a slowly recovering economy and a globalizing world, thoughtful military leaders - and some political leaders from both parties - are stressing that our military might flows from our economic power, not the other way around. Secretary Gates has frequently invoked the words of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who said that the United States "could only be as militarily strong as it was economically dynamic and fiscally sound." He has called on the military to align its spending with the actual challenges we face, and to make a new, serious push against waste, fraud and inefficiency.

With a commitment to use all elements of our power, not just our armed forces, those ought to be principles for bipartisan agreement. Instead, the conservative movement's Cold War-era leaders are mounting a rearguard action that would actually increase defense spending and make its current, historically high levels permanent - regardless of the challenges we face or the state of our economy. One conservative strategist called this intra-party debate "a massive, almost historic battle for the heart and soul of the Republican Party." It also represents a test of seriousness for anyone seeking responsibility for America's security and economic health at this troubled time.

National security leaders say, watch the economy; conservative think tanks willfully ignore economic realities. "Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has expressed concern about the impact of the deficit, noting last spring that 'our financial health is directly related to our national security.' More recently, in late August, he argued that the national debt is the single biggest threat to U.S. national security," write Larry Korb and Laura Conley of the Center for American Progress.

Yet leaders of the top three conservative think tanks - Arthur Brooks of the American Enterprise Institute, Edwin Feulner of Heritage and William Kristol of the Foreign Policy Initiative - are arguing that "military spending is not a net drain on our economy." However, this argument contradicts the facts. According to Korb and Conley, "Total defense spending in real terms is now higher than at any time since the end of World War II, more than throughout the entire Cold War, and even 10 percent higher than the peak of the Reagan defense buildup. The baseline defense budget has been growing in real terms for 13 straight years-the longest-ever period of sustained real growth in U.S. defense spending. As a result, the portion of the world's military expenditures the United States consumes compared to our potential adversaries has grown from 60 percent to 250 percent. This means that even if the United States were to cut its spending in half it would still be spending more than its current and potential adversaries."

This Cold War mentality doesn't match the national security priorities of the 21st century. Realist

scholar Daniel Drezner puts this in perspective: "I'm about to say something that might be controversial for people under the age of 25, but here goes. You know the threats posed to the United States by a rising China, a nuclear Iran, terrorists and piracy? You could put all of them together and they don't equal the perceived threat posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. And until I see another hostile country in the world that poses a military threat in Europe, the Middle East *and* Asia at the same time, I'm thinking that current defense spending *should* be lower than Cold War levels by a fair amount." [Larry Korb and Laura Conley, [9/10](#). Arthur Brooks, Edwin Feulner and William Kristol, [10/4/10](#). Daniel Drezner via Foreign Policy, [10/5/10](#)]

America's strength is based on its economic vibrancy - not the other way around. As Christopher Preble of the CATO Institute and Lawrence Korb of the Center for American Progress, who served as Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Reagan administration, write: "Over fifty years ago, President Dwight D. Eisenhower explained that a nation's security was directly tied to the health of its economy... 'Spiritual force, multiplied by economic force, multiplied by military force is roughly equal to security,' he explained. For Eisenhower this was the 'Great Equation.' 'If one of these factors falls to zero, or near zero, the resulting product does likewise.'" Kori Schake, who served in the George W. Bush administration at the National Security Council and at the State Department, has written: "Defense has for too long lived immune from economics: Its leading strategists rarely have economic training or attempt to link currency values, trade balances, or tax policies. Conservatives need to hearken back to our Eisenhower heritage, and develop a defense leadership that understands military power is fundamentally premised on the solvency of the American government and the vibrancy of the U.S. economy." [Lawrence Korb and Christopher Preble, [National Interest](#), [6/16/10](#). Kori Schake, [2/1/10](#)]

Defense budget highlights "battle for the heart and soul of the Republican Party." Radical budget hawks in the conservative establishment have established the "Defending Defense" project to tell other conservatives to fall in line with enormous defense budgets. "In a narrow sense, our project is very much a discussion to remind conservatives what their core beliefs are," said AEI scholar Thomas Donnelly, a lead author of the project. Extreme conservatives feel the need to whip their ideological brethren because there's open civil war in the conservative movement on this issue. "We're all on the same page until the polls close November 2," said Richard Viguerie, longtime conservative strategist who has allied with the Tea Party. After that, "a massive, almost historic battle for the heart and soul of the Republican Party begins."

A range of conservatives have publicly called for hemming in defense spending, including Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK), former Sen. Alan Simpson (R-WY), Kentucky Senate candidate Rand Paul and prospective GOP presidential candidate Mitch Daniels. Rand Paul's father, Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX) joined Rep. Walter Jones (R-NC) on the bipartisan Sustainable Defense Task Force, which outlined possible cuts in the defense budget that would not harm our national security. Going forward, extreme conservatives will continue to try to enforce defense budget positions based on partisan dogma, instead of our national security needs, even to the detriment of their party. [Thomas Donnelly, via Josh Rogin, [10/4/10](#). Richard Viguerie, via [AntiWar.com](#), [10/1/10](#). CNN, [9/7/10](#)]

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