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There's No Defense For Obama's Defense Spending

Peter Suderman | October 13, 2010

You can't really be surprised when some of Washington's perkiest boosters of war and defense pork put up a flashing neon sign announcing that, yes, they're still in favor of spending as many taxpayer dollars as possible on massive missiles, nasty nukes, and fancy flyin'-and-killin' machines. Cutting government down to size might be important, sure, but it ain't *that* important—not when there are precious defense dollars on the line. Or, to put it another way: *Are you saying you don't support the troops?*

More to the point: What do the hawks have to worry about? President Obama, despite speaking out against “dumb wars” on the campaign trail and knocking a Democratic rival for supporting the war in Iraq, isn't all that interested in paring back the war-bucks either. The total yearly bill for America's war bling current stands at at super-shiny \$680 billion—a figure that's only going to increase in coming years. And for what? Maybe that's just what's necessary to give our missile systems a “serious scrub”? (Can't we just run them through a 10 dollar car wash?)



Whatever the rationale for Obama's defense spending, it's depressingly familiar, especially for a guy who ran on the idea that change was a-comin'. As the Cato Institute's Christopher Preble points out in *Foreign Policy*, when it comes to defense spending, Obama is following in the footsteps of his big-spending predecessors:

Unfortunately, the president has shown no real interest in cutting military spending or in revisiting the purpose of U.S. military power. Why not? For all his talk of change, Obama has continued on the path set by his predecessors. Like George W. Bush and Bill Clinton before him, he sees the U.S. military as the world's sole policeman, and its armed social worker. It is this all-encompassing mission that requires a large military—and a very expensive one. Americans today spend more on their military, adjusting for inflation, than at any time during the Cold War, even though the threats that they face are quite modest.

What would a serious reduction in the defense-spending tab look like? Earlier this summer, a bipartisan group of defense wonks tallied up \$960 billion in potential cuts over the next decade. And Preble, along with Benjamin H. Friedman put together a plan to slash \$1.2 trillion. You

might think that in a time of near-universal worry about the growing deficit, a Democratic president might take the opportunity to trim the defense budget by a few bombs. But holding military spending at its current levels—much less trimming it by the trillion-or-so dollars that experts say could be cut—apparently isn't on the table. Obama wouldn't even include military spending in his proposed spending freeze. As an influential critic of military spending once said about the country's ongoing indulgence in defense pork, "Twenty years after the Cold War ended, this is simply not acceptable. It's irresponsible. Our troops and our taxpayers deserve better." That's true, and could be pretty good guidance for a willing politician. And all it would take for the president to follow it would be for him to listen to his own advice.

Read Steve Chapman on the myth of Democratic defense cuts here. Read Brian Doherty on why we should bring the troops home here.