



Funding a balanced force

By Christopher Preble

February 2, 2015

Cutting military spending is hard but not impossible. Nearly every secretary of defense has canceled or truncated popular weapon systems, often in the face of opposition from senior military leaders and prominent members of Congress. Dick Cheney killed the Navy and Marine Corps' A-12 Avenger attack aircraft, Donald Rumsfeld axed the Army's Crusader artillery system and the Comanche helicopter, and Robert Gates capped the purchase of new F-22 fighters for the Air Force.

In other cases, though, Congress forces the Pentagon to buy things it doesn't want or need: Cheney tried — and failed — to kill the V-22 Osprey. Congress may saddle the Air Force with the A-10 Thunderbolt (better known as the Warthog) for a few more years or compel the Navy to keep the aircraft carrier George Washington in service. The Pentagon is maintaining excess base capacity, partly because Congress has resisted efforts to close any in the United States since 2005.

Congress's shortsighted parochialism could have a serious impact on military readiness. Consider, for example, the one area of the Pentagon's budget that has remained nearly impervious to cost cutting: salaries and benefits for military personnel.

The reasons why are obvious enough: The military is the most popular institution in America, and the men and women serving in the military are almost universally revered. Cutting the troops' pay is about as popular as kicking Santa Claus on Christmas — but the opprobrium lasts 365 days of the year.

Still, there is broad agreement across the political spectrum that personnel costs must be reined in. A joint statement signed by over two-dozen defense experts warned, "If Congress fails to curb the growth in military compensation costs, they will continue to grow as the defense budget

shrinks, crowding out funds needed for training, readiness and for the replacement of worn-out equipment.”

The Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission recommended reforms for future service members that would ultimately result in lower personnel costs. Sen. John McCain has signaled that he would consider changes, but advocacy groups are already lobbying to maintain the status quo. Congress is likely to bend to the pressure, although it did approve modest changes in the 2015 budget.

However, there is another way to reduce military personnel costs without cutting pay and benefits for active-duty men and women: Reduce the number of active-duty troops. A smaller military could be even more well-trained and better compensated than the one that we have today.

In nearly every human endeavor, from farming to manufacturing, technology has reduced the number of people required to accomplish a task. The military is no exception. Aircraft with pilots and large crews on board once dropped many bombs to destroy a single target. Over time, smaller planes with just one or two people on board dropped more accurate ordnance. Today, remotely piloted aircraft essentially eliminate the risk to the attacker, who can operate the vehicle from many thousands of miles away. Similar stories of fewer personnel operating fewer platforms, and achieving greater results, can be told with respect to crews on naval ships and submarines.

However, one stubborn exception remains. Armed-nation building, what the military calls counterinsurgency (COIN), has proved nearly impervious to efficiency gains. When the United States chooses to shuffle the political deck in a weak or failing state, it needs men and women on the ground to do the work. Bombs can't build schools or bridges, reform legal codes or root out corruption. And most of all, they can't convince the locals that we care about them enough to stick around for the long haul and will be there to protect them if the irreconcilables return to exact vengeance.

And that backlash is nearly inevitable; those driven out of power will fight to regain what they lost. That is why the nation's most famous COIN advocate, Gen. David Petraeus, often spoke of gains in Iraq and Afghanistan as being “fragile and reversible.” FM 3-24, the military's COIN bible, expressed similar sentiments: “Insurgencies are protracted by nature. Thus, COIN operations always demand considerable expenditures of time and resources.”

But the United States is ill suited to such missions precisely because Americans lack the will patience to sustain them. The American people will strike our enemies with a vengeance, but solid majorities believe that the nation-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan weren't worth the effort. The widespread opposition to deeper involvement in the Syrian civil war demonstrates that the public's skepticism hasn't abated.

The public's instincts are correct. Fixing failed states, or rescuing weak ones, isn't necessary to preserve U.S. security. Terrorists operate in many perfectly healthy states (including Spain, the U.K. and, most recently, France), while many weak or failing states don't serve as launching pads for terrorism. We should deal with threats from Yemen or Somalia or Afghanistan as they arise and drop the pretense that we can or must construct a modern nation state in any of those places.

If we are unlikely to embark on protracted nation-building missions for decades on end, we should revisit the other possible rationales for a large standing Army. If we reduce America's permanent overseas presence and encourage other countries to defend themselves, we could replace forward-deployed active-duty troops with reservists serving stateside, saving more money in the process.

In the end, however, this isn't just about saving money; it's about spending money wisely. Ronald Reagan said, "Defense is not a budget issue. You spend what you need." He was right, which is why it is crucial that we understand what we need. The misallocation of funds — whether for platforms the Pentagon doesn't need, or bases it doesn't want or personnel it won't use — takes away from other priorities. We need a balanced force focused on defending vital U.S. interests, not a top-heavy force geared to fight the last decade's wars.

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