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MONDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2010

As Deficit-Cutting Pressures Mount, Will Congress Cut Defense?

By Megan Scully

Pro-defense Republicans already are looking ahead to the next Congress to use their party's newfound legislative power to boost the Pentagon budget, pointing to the wear and tear on the military after nearly a decade of war and the need to hedge against a multitude of future threats.

Underscoring the need to reduce the deficit is President Obama's own bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, whose chairmen released a proposal last week that called for slashing \$100 billion out of the Pentagon's budget in 2015.

How feasible would it be for lawmakers to make these kinds of cuts to defense? Is it easier politically for Republicans, with their strong support of the military, to slash Pentagon budgets?



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Deficits and Defense (sic)

By [Christopher Preble](#)

Director of Foreign Policy Studies, Cato Institute

As usual, I find myself in agreement with Paul Sullivan. If the country is serious about reducing the deficit, and it should be, then all spending must be on the table. The primary driver of our long term fiscal imbalance is entitlements. The demographic trends make it impossible to continue along our current path, which will have a shrinking pool of workers paying increasingly generous retirement and health care benefits for retirees who live longer and longer lives. The deficit reduction commission's end product simply must include some programmatic reforms to deal with the generational imbalances if it is going to be taken seriously. And the early opposition from a handful of special-interest groups suggests that there is a lack of seriousness all around.

Other spending must also be on the table, however, and that includes the roughly 23 percent of the federal budget that goes to the military. This often poses a particular challenge for Republicans given their traditional support for military spending and their professed commitment to fiscal discipline. But it need not be particularly difficult. If Republicans reaffirm that the core function of government, many would say one of the *only* core functions of government, is defense (strictly speaking), then the path to a politically sustainable and economically sound defense posture is clear: a military geared to defending the United States and its vital national interests, and not permanently deployed as the world's policeman and armed social worker. Such a posture 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. My colleague Ben Friedman and I provide an overview of such cuts [here](#), with more detail provided in our recent [Cato paper](#). (We'll be discussing these issues at a public forum featuring Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) as well as the Lexington Institute's Loren Thompson this Friday at Cato. Details can be found [here](#).)

Serious cuts to military spending -- in other words, far deeper cuts than those proposed last week by Erskine Bowles and Alan Simpson, the co-chairs of the president's debt reduction commission -- 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.

Not so long ago, the United States was staring across two oceans at a globe-straddling Soviet empire, one that was sometimes allied with a pugnacious China anxious to settle scores for past injustices. But the international environment is considerably less threatening today, and it is simply crazy to be spending more in real, inflation-adjusted dollars on the military today than we did during the height of the Korean or Vietnam Wars.

If deficits, which have been around for a while, mobilize a significant number of voters to take spending seriously, and force a long-overdue strategic reassessment, then I say all the better. But we could have, and should have, had this conversation long before it reached the point of crisis.

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What to cut, and who can cut it

By [Sydney J. Freedberg Jr.](#)

NationalJournal.com

I'm not afraid that the Tea Party can't take on the defense budget. It was Dick Cheney, no leftie peacenik, who hacked the first big slice out of the Pentagon in what became the drawdown of the 1990s. Even the GOP's patron saint, Ronald Reagan, had begun to apply the brakes on defense spending before he left office. (Just as Jimmy Carter actually began what became the Reagan buildup). Republicans of whatever stripe can cut defense just fine. And if anyone right now has both the political momentum and the everything-on-the-table mindset needed to make real cuts, it's the Tea Partiers.

What worries me is that maybe Congress, as an institution, can't cut defense. There are too many contracts in too many districts -- as part of deliberate "political engineering" by contractors and their Pentagon allies, as well as earmarking and logrolling by legislators -- and not enough political incentives to offer up YOUR program that employs people in YOUR district on the altar of fiscal prudence. We all agree it's a good idea, but who bells the freakin' cat? It's like...

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Thoughtful, Strategic Leaders Needed

By [Paul Sullivan](#)

Professor of Economics, National Defense University

Eventually the tough decisions will need to be made. The most sizable elephants in the room are entitlements spending and how these are expected to soar in the coming years. The population is aging. There are less people working to pay off the benefits to retirees, which also would include Medicaid and social security. The recent report out of the President's Fiscal Commission points to some answers on these issues.

http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/WSJ_CoChair_Draft.pdf. Even with all of the hoopla about this report many of its prescriptions seem like baby steps compared to what needs to be done.

The fiscal commission draft report also has some ideas for defense cuts. These include with the numbers to the right being the 2015 benefits in billions from such cuts.

Apply the overhead savings Secretary Gates has promised to defici...

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Lower Taxes vs. Deficit Reduction

By [Wayne White](#)*Adjunct Scholar, Middle East Institute*

Perhaps the proverbial 400 lb. gorilla in the room in the fiscal debate is what appears to be a profound contradiction in the thinking of many conservative lawmakers and their supporters: the simultaneous desire to lower taxes while trying to achieve far lower fiscal deficits.

As Ron Marks has noted, in order to make a significant dent in the federal deficit, serious thought must be given to taking on many previous political sacred cows. And, yes, Republicans and Democrats doubtless will clash sharply over which ones to tackle because each side will target those important to the other side as most expendable. This is likely to be one major source of gridlock in Washington.

Yet, especially damaging is the widespread belief that lower taxes will bring enough fiscal stimulation to offset a considerable amount of budgetary red ink. This concept failed badly during the 1980's when initiated by the Reagan Administration, instead causing deficits to balloon. And the US economy was far more vigorous and balanced 25-30 years ago. Following that course now, as with the ...

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Mental Inertia

By [Michael Brenner](#)*Professor of International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh*

Assessing how the changing political climate in Washington may affect the Pentagon's budget is uncomplicated. The Republican austerity hawks will be offset by the national security hawks. With both potential agents of change neutralized, we shall continue indefinitely along the course of regular annual real increases in defense spending. The same for the national intelligence budget.

American strategy (or, more accurately strategies) also will show little if any deviation from the current flight plan. Inertia is at work on this plane as well – albeit of quite a different kind. For the greater part of a decade, the United States has been pursuing two audacious projects that intersect and mutually reinforce each other. The one is a global campaign to destroy or neutralize anyone who may seek to attack the United States and its citizens by unconventional means and methods. The conjectured persons and groups are broadly defined as all those with an inferred intent to execute a terrorist act, to organize one, to plan one or even to imagine one. This constitutes t...

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The Taste of a Car Bumper

By [Ron Marks](#)

Senior Fellow, George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute

Old story: A dog runs down the road chasing cars. Never catches one. Then, one day, the dog finally catches a car's bumper. Oops, says the dog, now what?

So, the Tea Party Republicans have now captured the bumper of the American government. They have persuaded a justifiably angry portion of the electorate they can do the job of running the Federal government. Sadly, the Party folks are now faced with the ugly prospect that follows running for office – they now have to run the government. And, boy, are they ever in for it now. There will be nothing pleasant about dealing with Washington's budget problems. We are not in crisis yet, but we are sure drifting there fast. Our budget deficit is not sustainable. The economy is unlikely to provide relief for the immediate period by growing quickly enough and providing additional revenue. And, the Federal government outlays are just not that politically easy to cut – rhetoric be damned.

The basic facts are ugly. Two-thirds of the Federal budget is tied up in social security, Medicare and debt...

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