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The GOP and Military Spending

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The [Defending Defense crowd](#)^[3] has a new reason not to cut military spending: [we're at war](#)^[4] (again, still). So far, with a government shutdown [looming](#)^[5], the GOP House leadership seems to agree that the Pentagon's budget will be largely off limits in the search for spending cuts.

The prospects for deep cuts in military spending were never great, especially so long as the Inside-the-Beltway consensus holds that the United States is, and should forever remain, the world's policeman. As I've said repeatedly, and as Ben Friedman and I detailed [here](#)^[6] and [here](#)^[7] we spend so much on our military because we ask it to do so much. Besides the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and now Libya, the U.S. military is still helping with post-earthquake/tsunami clean up in Japan, and is hunting terrorists and pirates in a dozen far-flung places around the globe. Meanwhile, [our allies are cutting military spending](#)^[8], which suggests that the burdens on our troops will grow rather than diminish in coming years.

But there isn't even much enthusiasm among fiscal hawks for forcing the Pentagon and its army of contractors and Beltway Bandits to give up some of their hefty gains over the last decade. Cuts on the order of 10 or 15 percent would still leave military spending at the end of this decade higher, in real, inflation-adjusted terms, than it was in 2000. The mere prospect strikes terror in the hearts of inveterate hawks. As my Cato colleague Tad DeHaven [pointed out](#)^[9] yesterday, the Republican's "YouCut" web site manages to identify a paltry few hundred million dollars in potential savings from the Pentagon's bloated budget. The release of this laughably meager (and obviously half-hearted) attempt at fiscal discipline is made only more risible by the near-simultaneous release of a [GAO study](#)^[10] documenting, yet again, the massive waste and mismanagement that is rampant in weapons procurement. Among the GAO's key findings: "...half of DOD's major defense acquisition programs do not meet cost performance goals" and "80 percent of programs have experienced an increase in unit costs from initial estimates."

Heck, even the Heritage Foundation, a founding member of Defending Defense, managed to [identify](#)^[11] a few billion dollars in savings in a military budget that exceeds \$700 billion. How to explain the GOP's timidity? I can't.

It seems that a combination of factors—including war fatigue, massive budget deficits, and

long-term fiscal imbalance—are not enough to convince Republican leaders to get serious about military spending cuts. The appeals from traditional conservatives and Tea Party activists don't register. Polling which shows support for cuts, even among rank-and-file Republicans, can't budge the "find cuts elsewhere" caucus. There is even a growing appreciation that, in the words of Sen. Tom Coburn's spokesman John Hart: "By subsidizing our allies' defense budgets, American taxpayers are essentially subsidizing France's 35-hour workweek and Western European socialism." Hart told Politico [4], "Taking defense spending off the table keeps American taxpayers on the hook for more government at home and abroad." So far, not even this line of argument has moved the needle very far.

In addition to Sen. Coburn, I know that there are other well-intended Republicans on Capitol Hill who are serious about cutting military spending. So far, they have run headlong into a brick wall [12] of intransigence known as the military appropriators. But I admire the tenacity, and the courage, of those who take seriously their pledge to be responsible stewards of taxpayers' money. That defense is a core function of government is no excuse. The truth is that our military could easily protect American lives, liberty, and property from harm at far less cost, *if* they were to focus on those core objectives. Given this reality, I predict that eventually the wall will crumble. It just might take a while.

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[3] <http://www.foreignpolicyi.org/content/defending-defense-response-obama-administration%E2%80%99s-fiscal-2012-budget>

[4] <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0311/52021.html>

[5] <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-congress-spending-20110330,0,1626963.story>

[6] http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=12151

[7] <http://www.downsizinggovernment.org/defense>

[8] http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/us-nato-see-risks-as-defense-budgets-shrink-across-europe/2011/02/14/ABPBcIG_story.html

[9] <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/a-new-low-for-gops-youcut>

[10] <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d11233sp.pdf>

[11] <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/02/Taking-a-Scalpel-to-the-Defense-Budget>

[12] <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/mar/23/defense-cuts-a-tough-sell-in-bid-to-curb-deficit/?page=1>