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The Real Price of Power

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Robert Kagan's [feature article](#) ^[3] in the latest *Weekly Standard* is worth a look. As one of the leading advocates for “benevolent global hegemony”—a phrase that he coined with William Kristol in 1996—Kagan offers a reasonably fair critique of recent calls for cutting military spending. It is a good bet that the arguments presented in this essay will be repeated elsewhere as new members of Congress look to make good on their promise to make deep cuts in spending, and as other defenders of the status quo fight hard to keep the Pentagon’s budget off the table.

Like others who have ventured into this debate, Kagan goes too far in implying that national-security spending is irrelevant to the nation’s debt. It is of course true that

entitlements and mandatory spending pose the greatest threat to the nation's fiscal health, but \$700+ billion isn't chump change. The question of what we should spend on the military ought to take into account the trade-offs, an argument that Dwight Eisenhower advanced in his farewell address just over 50 years ago, and that [Charles Zakaib and I highlighted last week](#) ^[4]. (See also [James Ledbetter's discussion](#) ^[5] on this point.)

According to Kagan, the explanation for why the various deficit reduction commissions have recommended cutting military spending:

boils down to one of fairness, and politics. It is not that cutting defense is necessary to save the economy. But if the American people are going to be asked to accept cuts in their domestic entitlements, the assumption runs, they're going to want to see the pain shared across the board, including by defense.

This "fair share" argument is at least more sober than phony "cut defense or kill the economy" sensationalism, and it has the appearance of reasonableness. But it is still based on a fallacy. Distributing cuts equally is not an intrinsically good thing. . . . Not all cuts have equal effect on the national well-being.

Actually, it is a question of fairness, but not the one that he proposed. Because security is a core function of government (I think one of the *only* core functions of government), it would be a mistake to treat military spending as synonymous with spending on, say, farm subsidies. But Kagan's writings presume that other countries' governments do not—and should not—see their responsibilities in the same way. Kagan contends that American taxpayers should be responsible for the security of people living in Europe or East Asia or the Middle East. Or anywhere in the world, really. This argument might have been plausible in 1945, or 1955, or even 1965, when our allies were weak, and when we were confronting a common enemy in the Soviet Union. But one of the practical effects of continuing to pay for the security of others more than two decades after the collapse of the Soviet empire is that we have created dependency, a problem with all forms of foreign aid. It simply isn't fair to ask Americans to pay for something that other people should pay for themselves. For reference, the average American—every man, woman and child—spends two and a half times more on national security than the French or the British, five times more than citizens living in other NATO countries, and seven and a half times as much as the average Japanese.

A second key theme in Kagan's work of the past two decades is that the world will collapse in a fiery inferno if the U.S. military was slightly smaller, and if Washington was slightly less inclined toward intervention than in, say, 1998. I think that Kagan exaggerates our insecurities, and he bases his predictions for how others will react to U.S. restraint on a notion of the world of the mid-19th century, not the world of today. I don't have room to go into that here, but I spent a good part of a chapter of [my book](#) ^[6] discussing the point, and Justin Logan is preparing a longer response to Kagan's article for publication elsewhere.

For now, I agree with Kagan on one point: it doesn't make sense to discuss cutting military spending without rethinking the purpose of military power. We disagree on the need for a

strategic change. The strategy advocated by Kagan and other neoconservatives since the end of the Cold War has needlessly and unfairly burdened Americans with the costs of maintaining global peace, and could and should have been changed long ago. The fiscal pressures add urgency to this discussion. I welcome the debate.

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