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GOP Fires at the Pentagon

Robert Dreyfuss | January 27, 2011

In 2001, in a profile of Grover Norquist I wrote for *The Nation*, the conservative activist and president of Americans for Tax Reform proclaimed that he'd like to shrink the government "down to the size where we can drown it in a bathtub." It now appears that Norquist—with a growing alliance of libertarians, deficit hawks and traditional old-style conservatives—wants to make sure the Pentagon and its generals end up in that bathtub, too.

For years only a hardy band of liberals in Congress—the Progressive Caucus, the Black Caucus and individuals like Representative Barney Frank—challenged the bloated military budget. The Republicans, ignoring President Eisenhower's warning fifty years ago about the military-industrial complex, always gave the Pentagon what it wanted and more, gleefully bashing Democrats as weak-kneed on national security. Since the fall, however, a civil war of sorts has broken out among Republicans over defense, with the dissident faction led by Norquist, the libertarian Cato Institute and a growing group of allies, including some factions of the rambunctious Tea Party movement, backing significant cuts.

According to a well-known conservative activist, in early January House majority leader Eric Cantor quietly circulated to the entire GOP caucus a letter organized by Americans for Tax Reform (ATR) that called for the Pentagon's budget to be put on the chopping block. "We write to urge you to institute principled spending reform that rejects the notion that spending cuts can be avoided in certain parts of the federal budget," said the letter, written in November to Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell and incoming House Speaker John Boehner. "Department of Defense spending, in particular, has been provided protected status that has isolated it from serious scrutiny." The letter was signed by twenty-three people, a Who's Who of the conservative movement, including Norquist, David Keene of the American Conservative Union, Cato's Christopher Preble, Richard Viguerie, Al Regnery of *The American Spectator* and many others. Also signing were Lisa Miller of Tea Party WDC and Matt Kibbe of FreedomWorks, the pro-Tea Party organization led by former House majority leader Dick Armey. That Cantor, who has advocated cutting the military budget, sent ATR's letter around was seen as a shot across the bow of Republicans who consider that budget a "sacred cow," as ATR called it.

On January 19 more than 150 Congressional staffers and experts packed a Capitol Hill forum sponsored by Cato at which Norquist and Preble laid out the conservative case for slashing military spending. Preble, with Ben Friedman of Cato, outlined a series of cuts that go far beyond what Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the Obama administration have proposed, identifying more

than \$1.2 trillion in cuts over the next decade—about a fifth of overall Pentagon spending. “When the Soviet Union disappeared,” said Norquist wryly, “a lot of people on the right failed to notice.” Referring to George W. Bush’s support for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and for greater military spending, Norquist said too many Republicans support feeding the Pentagon’s appetite “just because Fearless Leader said it’s a good idea.”

Instead, Norquist called for a debate among Republicans over Obama’s escalation of the war in Afghanistan, asking, “What are we doing? Why are we there? How long do we plan to be there?” A week earlier, speaking at a dinner organized by Steve Clemons of the New America Foundation, Norquist cited polling data to support his view that, if debated, pro-war neoconservatives and hawks would lose the argument. “I’m confident about where that conversation would go,” he said. “I think the people who are against that conversation know where it would go, too.”

Since the fall, a coalition of hawks calling itself Defending Defense has assembled to challenge the dissidents. It’s represented most vociferously by an ad hoc alliance of think tanks: the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation and the Foreign Policy Initiative (home to William Kristol of *The Weekly Standard*), an updated version of the Project for a New American Century. In a September *Washington Post* op-ed, AEI’s Danielle Pletka and Thomas Donnelly described the issue as “nothing less than a fight for the soul of conservatism,” blasting “Libertarians and Tea Party darlings” along with GOP Senator Tom Coburn, who championed hefty military cuts.

In February the budget wars will begin in earnest on Capitol Hill. Liberal Democrats who want to downsize the military may find it tough to persuade mainstream Democrats to challenge Obama and Gates, and they’ll welcome support from deficit-minded Republicans and the incoming class of Tea Party types. Let’s hope they find it.

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