



## A Heritage of Exaggeration



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To paraphrase Ronald Reagan, there they go again. Even as the key players in the budget debate, from President Obama to House Budget Committee chair Paul Ryan (R-WI) are shirking their responsibility to take a serious look at reducing military spending, a new [report](#) from the Heritage Foundation calls for an increase in funding for the Pentagon and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As usual, Heritage not only exaggerates the threats to our security, but it exaggerates the costs of addressing those threats. The Heritage claims would be comical if the topic wasn't so serious.

The bottom line is that in recent years military spending has been at its [highest levels since World War II](#) - higher than during Korea, higher than during Vietnam, and higher than during the Reagan buildup of the 1980s. And while a significant portion of this funding has gone to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the bulk of it - [more than two-thirds](#) -- has not. It is in the Pentagon's base budget, which is now over \$550 billion per year. According to an analysis by the [Project on Defense Alternatives](#), cutting the Pentagon's base budget to \$500 billion per year and holding it there would save more than \$900 billion over the next decade relative to current plans. Is it really possible that we cannot defend the vital interests of this country for half a trillion dollars a year?

But that's not all. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has noted, current U.S. military spending is almost more than spending by the rest of the world combined. Furthermore, the United States spends more than four times -- over \$700 billion to [\\$150 billion](#) -- as much per year for military purposes as its alleged new "peer competitor," China. And that's using the highest existing estimate of China's military budget. The United States overwhelms the rest of the world when it comes to the basic foundations of military power, from deployed aircraft carriers to advanced combat aircraft to superbly trained Marines and Special Forces. With a little help from our friends, as we are seeing in the current operation in Libya, these assets would go that much further.

So where is the scary spending gap that Heritage complains of? One of their recent reports calls for a \$27 billion increase in military spending, and that's just a down payment, in their view. Part of their fear campaign is based on statistical sleight of hand. They argue that because military spending is a smaller share of GDP than it used to be, it

is therefore insufficient in some way. This ignores the fact that it is at its highest levels since World War II in absolute terms. As one colleague of mine pointed out, we are not preparing to wage war on the GDP; we are preparing to defend ourselves from potential adversaries.

To the extent that spending figures are relevant, it is the spending of potential adversaries that matters, not military spending's share of GDP. And by that score current spending levels are more than adequate.

Looked at another way, what are the threats that justify spending over \$700 billion per year on the military? For some of the most urgent threats we face, such as climate change or outbreaks of disease, military force has no logical role in crafting a solution. For others, like nuclear non-proliferation, using force would be counterproductive at best, disastrous at worst. That leaves the tasks of helping protect key regional allies in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. But as Christopher Preble for the Cato Institute has [noted](#) in a recent piece at the National Interest, our allies are not pulling their weight when it comes to providing for their own defense. If our alliances could be made into genuine partnerships, we would not need to maintain over 700 overseas military bases (or [even more](#), by one count) or sustain a Navy that is [larger than the next 13 navies in the world combined](#) (11 of which belong to our allies). And as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has [noted](#), the United States should get out of the business of waging "boots on the ground" wars of occupation in the Middle East and Asia.

All of these changes would clear the way for substantial cuts in military spending without harming our security. But don't tell the Heritage Foundation that. They're too busy crying wolf.

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