

U.S. military must cost less and do less

Editor's Note: Christopher Preble is the director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and the author of [The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free](#).

By **Christopher Preble** – Special to CNN

The nation's current fiscal crisis has focused attention on the military's budget.

Although most Americans want a strong military, a growing number seem to understand that significant cuts in the Pentagon's budget would not undermine U.S. security. We would retain an enormous margin of superiority over any conceivable combination of rivals for many decades to come.

By cutting military spending, we could achieve significant savings - [perhaps as much as \\$1.2 trillion over the next ten years](#) - without imposing additional burdens on the brave men and women who serve in our military.

To achieve this, we must revisit the assumptions that have guided U.S. defense planning for over two decades.

If we want a military that costs less, we will have to ask it to do less.

A review of our overarching military strategy is long overdue. Even if the federal government was running a surplus, I'd argue for a grand strategy of restraint. But it is typical for politicians to avoid difficult choices until a crisis forces their hand.

Such a crisis is upon us.

If we are serious about deficit reduction and putting the country back on a path to solvency, we cannot exempt military spending from close scrutiny.

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Every government agency and every taxpayer is being asked to make hard choices and to prioritize between essential tasks and superfluous ones. The Pentagon should be required to do the same.

If our survival was in question, if hordes of angry savages were at the gates, or a modern, fascist nation-state were poised to take control of the Eurasian landmass, then we would put aside questions of cost at that time. As Ronald Reagan once said, "Defense is not a budget issue. You spend what you need."

But not even Reagan spent as much as we do today. For each of the last six years, U.S. national security spending has exceeded - in real, inflation-adjusted terms - the high point of the Gipper's build up.

The reason why we spend so much today might surprise many Americans, but also reveals how we can reduce the Pentagon's budget without overburdening our troops and without undermining our security.

Americans spend far more than what we need for our own defense because we have asked our military to defend other countries.

It is time for our allies to take primary responsibility for defending themselves and for securing their vital interests.

We also spend a lot more on our military than during the height of the Cold War because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These were originally justified on the grounds that they would protect us from terrorism. That was never true in the case of Iraq and [it isn't any longer with respect to Afghanistan](#).

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Effective counterterrorism includes disrupting terrorist plans, impeding their ability to raise funds, and blocking their recruitment efforts. It involves wise intelligence collection and timely analysis. It relies heavily on the cooperation of local officials. Stationing 100,000 or more U.S. troops in Afghanistan- or anywhere else, for that matter - is not essential to any of these important counterterrorism missions.

Indeed, stationing our troops in foreign lands does more to aid terrorist recruitment than to stop it.

This isn't the fault of our troops, who are extremely careful about using deadly force. They go to great length to avoid harming innocent bystanders, knowing that even a single unfortunate incident can upend months of hard work.

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But the mere presence of foreign troops can engender resentment, animosity and, in the worst cases, violence. People don't like having foreigners coming into their country and advising them on how to run their schools, farm their fields and administer justice.

Americans have traditionally avoided such nation-building enterprises. Telling other people how to live their lives smacked of colonialism and we were always anxious to draw distinctions between us and the arrogant imperialists who once presumed to govern distant continents from the comfort of the throne rooms and salons of Europe.

6/17/2011

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Instead, Americans husbanded their power and focused on building strength at home. Rather than behaving as the world's government, we believed it better to set an example that others could emulate.

We can still do this.

If we live within our means, and stop making promises that we can't keep, we can focus our military efforts in a few key areas and call on other countries to do more.

The views expressed in this article are solely those of Christopher Preble.

Should the U.S. substantially reduce its spending on the military?

Yes No

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