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MAGAZINE

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A Plan B for Obama

A stagnant economy. Declining American influence. Dictators on the march abroad. And a more Republican Congress coming soon. Barack Obama is in big trouble. But it's never too late. **Foreign Policy** has a plan, 14 in fact, for how the president can find his mojo again.

NOVEMBER 2010



Christopher Preble

CUT (REALLY CUT) MILITARY SPENDING

Despite all the hype about Defense Secretary Robert Gates and his cuts of big-ticket military projects, the Pentagon's \$680 billion budget is actually slated to increase in coming years. This is unconscionable at a time when taxpayers are under enormous stress and when the U.S. government must reduce spending across the board. Barack Obama can save big bucks without undermining U.S. security -- but only if he refocuses the military on a few, core missions.

Unfortunately, the president has shown no real interest in cutting military spending or in revisiting the purpose of U.S. military power. Why not? For all his talk of change, Obama has continued on the path set by his predecessors. Like George W. Bush and Bill Clinton before him, he sees the U.S. military as the world's sole policeman, and its armed social worker. It is this all-encompassing mission that requires a large military -- and a very expensive one. Americans today spend more on their military, adjusting for inflation, than at any time during the Cold War, even though the threats that they face are quite modest.

If Obama is serious about reducing the deficit and keeping U.S. troops out of "dumb wars," as he famously dubbed them, he should put his money where his mouth is. Cutting defense spending is the only reliable way to stifle Washington's impulse to send U.S. troops on ill-considered missions around the globe.

The hawks will scream, but America will be just fine. Obama can capitalize on the country's unique advantages -- wide oceans to the east and west, friendly neighbors to the north and south, a dearth of powerful enemies globally, and the wealth to adapt to dangers as they arise -- by adopting a grand strategy of restraint. The United States could shed the burden of defending other countries that are able to defend themselves, abandon futile efforts to fix failed states, and focus on those security challenges that pose the greatest threat to America. A strategic shift of this magnitude will not only reduce conflict and make the United States safer, but it will enable Obama to reshape the military to suit this more modest set of objectives, at a price that's far easier for taxpayers to swallow.

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

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