

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

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## Ike's Balancing Act

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January 12, 2011

[Charles Zakaib](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, [Christopher A. Preble](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

For the next several months, Congress and President Obama will be struggling with how to balance our national priorities against our available resources. This month many are reminded of a man who bid farewell to the office of the presidency with a plea for balance. Clouded by the now ubiquitous words “military-industrial complex” is the broader theme of balance in [President Dwight D. Eisenhower's farewell address](#) <sup>[4]</sup>. “Costly action” and “development of unrealistic programs” would be a tempting response to crises that would surely come, but, he advised:

each proposal must be weighed in the light of a broader consideration: the need to maintain balance in and among national programs, balance between the private and the public economy, balance between the cost and hoped for advantages, balance between the clearly necessary and the comfortably desirable, balance between our essential requirements as a nation and the duties imposed by the nation upon the individual, balance between actions of the moment and the national welfare of the future. Good judgment seeks balance and progress. Lack of it eventually finds imbalance and frustration.

Threats to this balance, Eisenhower warned, would not come from the Soviets or from some other foreign adversary, but from our reaction to those perceived threats. This included not only the dangers from the military-industrial complex (and government domination of the scientific community) but also from “the plundering for our own ease and convenience the precious resources of tomorrow.”

As the debate over what and how much to cut heats up, it would be wise for Congress and President Obama to consider Eisenhower's words. Despite spending more (in real terms) on defense than at any time during the Cold War, many contend it's not enough to confront a group of thugs who have no government, no army, and receive much of their stature and influence from our own actions. Thankfully, however, the tide appears to be turning. Recently, Secretary Gates has [stated](#) <sup>[5]</sup> that “not every defense dollar is sacred.” And not long before that, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center prudently [told us](#) <sup>[6]</sup> that “we should not assume the terrorist threat is existential” and that “sometimes we ought to just talk about this [terrorism] a lot less.” Perhaps, at least in some quarters, a better sense of balance is returning to discussions of the threats we face.

But, one may ask, what about future threats, China perhaps? Properly balancing our priorities now can protect our capability to respond in the future. As our colleague Benjamin Friedman [has said](#) <sup>[7]</sup>, “the best

hedge against an uncertain future is a prosperous and innovative economy supporting a capable military that can be expanded to meet rivals should they arise." Failing to make choices today threatens our prosperity and future capability. We should not allow unfounded fear and unrealistic solutions distort the proper balance of priorities. As Eisenhower hoped, "We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent phantom of tomorrow."

Of course, the need for balance was at the forefront of Eisenhower's thinking long before the farewell address. As James Ledbetter, author of *Unwarranted Influence* [8], notes, even in Eisenhower's first few months as president, he encountered difficulty in discerning and planning for the threats to the United States. That dilemma would confirm his skepticism of "total security" and lead him to say, during a radio address in May, 1953, that "It is a fact that there is no such thing as maximum military security, short of total mobilization of all our national resources." Even with the specter of the Soviet Union looming, he was determined not to make the United States into a garrison state. He would revisit that theme in his farewell address, reminding Americans then and now that "this world of ours, ever growing smaller, must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate."

In the furtherance of Eisenhower's thoughts, we here at Cato are presenting a conference [9] tomorrow to assess the meaning and impact of his farewell address. Please join us as we welcome two panels of esteemed scholars for our discussion and enjoy introductory remarks by Susan Eisenhower.

More by

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