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Cut Defense Spending

by Lawrence Korb and Christopher Preble

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Not surprisingly, the magnitude of the nation's fiscal crisis has inevitably evoked warnings that our insolvency threatens our national security. One part of dealing with this situation will entail reducing the projected level of defense spending by several hundreds of billions of dollars over the next decade.

President Obama made restoring the nation's strength at home the centerpiece of his just-released national-security strategy. The nation's top military leaders agree. "Our financial health is directly related to our national security," explained Joint Chief's Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen in a recent interview.

Such sentiments aren't new. Over fifty years ago, President Dwight D. Eisenhower explained that a nation's security was directly tied to the health of its economy. He understood that if military spending rose too high it would ultimately undermine U.S. security, which he saw as a product of both military strength and economic strength. And he consistently resisted calls from the Joint Chiefs and some members of Congress to outspend the USSR. "Spiritual force, multiplied by economic force, multiplied by military force is roughly equal to security," he explained. For Eisenhower this was the "Great Equation." "If one of these factors falls to zero, or near zero, the resulting product does likewise."

In his farewell address to the nation in January 1961, Ike warned of the burdens imposed by an overwhelming, and permanent, military establishment. Eisenhower correctly anticipated that the military-industrial complex's influence over politics would be difficult to break. He hoped that an engaged and knowledgeable citizenry would serve as the necessary corrective, but most Americans are simply too busy with their day-to-day affairs to pay much attention. A few Americans, meanwhile, benefit handsomely from military spending, and wish for the bonanza to continue unimpeded. As so often happens, the voices of the interested few outweigh those of the disinterested many.

That might be changing. As more Americans come to understand the high costs and dubious benefits of U.S. military dominance, a backlash is all but inevitable. The president's deficit-reduction commission has been hearing from voices from across the ideological spectrum calling for renewed scrutiny over military spending. The Commission, explained Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK), "affords us an opportunity to start some very late due diligence on national defense spending." The arch-conservative from one of the reddest states in the country called on the commissioners to "reduce wasteful, unnecessary, and duplicative defense spending that does nothing to make our nation safe."

The co-chairs of President Obama's bipartisan deficit commission, Alan Simpson, a former Republican Senator from Wyoming and Erskine Bowles, President Clinton's former chief of staff, have said that everything, including the military, should be on the proverbial table for proposed spending cuts.

Although the Pentagon budget has nearly doubled in real terms since 1998, and now is higher than at any time since World War II, the Defense Department remains one of the few government agencies for which the Obama administration has programmed real growth over the next decade. Since defense spending represents more than half of our discretionary spending, this trajectory must be altered if we

are to have any realistic chance of bringing our deficit under control and fulfilling Obama's pledge to improve national security by restoring our economic strength at home.

Obviously reining in the growth of defense spending will require making tradeoffs, but given the high level of defense spending this should not be that difficult. No doubt some hardliners and members of the military-industrial complex will dismiss talk of tradeoffs by pretending that we have an infinite reservoir of public will and public money just waiting to be tapped. They do this to free themselves from having to make hard choices about what we can do, as opposed to what we should do, or must do; in the process, however, they lose any reasonable claim to call themselves strategists. And they should have no credibility when advising policymakers who must operate in a world of constraints.

For those of us back on planet earth, strategy entails making choices. A nation that defends everything defends nothing. Policy makers can achieve responsible reductions in the Pentagon's budget without undermining U.S. security if they are willing to rethink the ends that our military is expected to attain. That is well beyond the deficit reduction commission's mandate, but if the commissioners recommend cuts to military spending, the administration should undertake a long-overdue reevaluation of U.S. foreign policy.

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