

Butler: Budget cuts aplenty in military spending

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Look to the right as you approach Oakland International Airport and you'll see a huge advertisement covering the side of a hanger.

The ad is from a jet engine company attempting to talk some sense with regard to military spending. The ad makes the point that the JSF (Joint Strike Force) fighter plane costs as much as 52 engines of the fighter planes it replaces. The new F-22 Raptors, of which we citizens now have 185, have cost us \$356 million each, including development costs.

That seems like a lot to me when I consider how much one plane's \$356 million would have bought in education and shovel-ready bridges to somewhere. As late as 2009, Congress approved spending for the last 20 of these planes at a cost of \$4.1 billion. Ronald Reagan might have said, "There you go again..." while Dwight Eisenhower, after warning of the industrial military complex, would have been spinning in his grave.

Republicans elected to Congress on the promise of cutting spending by an immediate \$100 billion now appear to be hard-pressed to come up with much more than \$32 billion in cuts. That hardly moves the needle.

Foreign aid is the one category that everyone agrees can be cut, but it represents less than 1 percent of our total budget. And some foreign aid is probably a good idea if we think it makes sense to help our allies out there. So, if we don't want to cut Medicare and Social Security, we have to aim our guns at the

only big ticket left --

wasteful military spending.

At \$653 billion per year (not counting the cost of Iraq and Afghanistan) our military budget is 10 times that of the next foreign power, and we spend more than the rest of the world combined.

There is a new new book out by Christopher Preble called "The Power Problem -- How American Military Dominance Makes us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free." The book compiles examples of egregious waste and projects that make no practical

or economic sense. They do make sense for employees of defense contractors, however -- those workers whose jobs are strategically spread out over 150 different congressional districts.

We have more than 5,000 nuclear warheads that cost us about \$18 billion annually to maintain. The Arizona senator who held up the non-proliferation treaty insisted on another \$80 billion to "upgrade the system" over the next 10 years. The list goes on and on. As James Surowiecki in the New Yorker magazine wrote back in 2006, defense spending is like Silicon Valley in the '90's "When you give lots of money to an industry with no audits and no supervision, people lose discipline."

In this country today, 20 percent of people whose native language is English cannot read or write.

Former San Francisco 49ers coach Bill Walsh used to make the point that when budget cuts ended sports, band and other extracurricular activities, they removed the reason for why many kids kept coming to school. Meanwhile, the percentage of high school graduates recruited into the service has dropped to 71 percent from 90 percent in just the past four years, and recruits receiving "moral waivers" because of previous minor offenses had doubled to 11 percent.

A book that suggests that we might be "less safe, less prosperous and less free" is leaving open the question of how a pared military complex might free up money to be spent in a more productive way. Spending some of it on education and science -- even band and sports -- would be a good start.

However, another point of Preble's book is that many countries enjoy a free ride at our expense. Assuming that those countries are our allies, it would make sense for us to cut back and let them pick up more of the cost for maintaining this New World Order.

When the government spends money to educate a child, build a bridge, or even construct something like Yosemite's Ahwahnee Lodge, we get a tangible benefit.

By comparison, the value of large-scale military spending is almost impossible to ascertain beyond just the immediate benefit of defense industry jobs and the lobbying money sloshing around. In the case of the F-22 Raptor, the latter figure is \$18 million per year just to keep the project afloat.

What Washington accomplishes in the next few years may determine the quality of retirement life for years to come. I'm reasonably optimistic, because the answers seem so obvious to me.

Meanwhile, I'm gripping the arms of my

Barcalounger tightly, because the politics of short-sighted selfishness can always win the day.

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