



Sullum: The Squeal of the War Hogs

By Jacob Sullum

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During a recent visit to New Hampshire, Lindsey Graham said that if he were president, he “would literally use the military” to force congressional approval of a bigger defense budget. Later the South Carolina senator’s spokesman said Graham was only kidding.

It’s too bad that Graham and other Republicans are not kidding when they say our national security is threatened by inadequate military spending, because that is also a joke. A little perspective shows why.

In a February 27 letter to Senate Budget Committee Chairman Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Jack Reed, D-R.I., bemoan the cuts required by the 2011 Budget Control Act, saying, “It is difficult to overstate the destructive impact on our military that has been wrought by the BCA.” But McCain and Reed – the chairman and ranking member, respectively, of the Senate Armed Services Committee – are up to the task.

“The effects of these arbitrary spending cuts have been devastating to the capabilities, readiness, morale and modernization of our armed forces,” they write. “American lives are being put at risk by the caps on defense spending mandated in the BCA.” The result, they say, is “a national security crisis of our own making,” with potentially “catastrophic” results.

Hawks like Graham and McCain, joined by at least 70 Republicans in the House, want us to believe it’s impossible to defend the country for a mere \$523 billion, the Pentagon’s base budget for the next fiscal year under the BCA. That amount, which is slightly higher than this year’s budget, does not include whatever our various wars will cost – another \$50 billion or so, according to President Obama’s estimate.

In real terms, the amount of money that Graham and McCain consider recklessly small is more than the U.S. government spent on the military in 2005, when it was in the midst of two wars that have been winding down in recent years. The Pentagon’s base budget is higher than it was in

2006 or in any year during the previous decade. Were we merely lucky to have escaped catastrophe back then?

Cato Institute analyst Christopher Preble notes that defense spending averaged \$458 billion a year in current dollars during the Cold War, \$601 billion a year under George W. Bush, and \$687 billion from 2009 through 2014. Contrary to Graham et al.'s fear mongering, Preble says, the BCA has not resulted in "a precipitous decline in military spending relative to where we were a generation ago."

The war hogs' warnings look even sillier when you compare our defense budget to spending by other countries. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the United States, with less than 5 percent of the world's population, accounts for nearly two-fifths of global military spending. It allocates more money to the military than the next eight biggest spenders combined.

The United States is a large country with peaceful neighbors. Yet it spends more than \$2,000 per capita on defense – as much as Israel, a tiny country beset by enemies, and more than twice as much as European countries such as the U.K., France and Germany.

One begins to suspect that our so-called defense budget is spent on a lot of things that have little or nothing to do with defense. Consider the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which dragged on for a dozen or so years and will ultimately cost taxpayers more than \$4 trillion, not to mention the thousands of lives lost.

Are we \$4 trillion safer than we would have been without those wars? "Boondoggle" does not come close to capturing such disastrous misappropriations.

"For the American people and their elected representatives to devote additional resources to national defense," McCain and Reed write, "they must be confident that the Department of Defense is making the best, most efficient use of our limited taxpayer dollars." Given the track record of the politicians who decide how to use the military, such confidence would be dangerously misplaced.