



The wrong manhood test

By: [Christopher Preble](#) and [Heather Hurlburt](#)

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In last week's State of the Union address, President Barack Obama declared that he would freeze government spending for three years, excepting Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security and "spending related to our national security."

This week, we can see what that blanket exemption for the Pentagon will cost us. The base budget (which excludes war costs) weighs in at a whopping \$548.9 billion, the largest since the end of World War II. Military spending advocates might note that this represents just a 3.4 percent increase over last year, but inflation-adjusted spending on national defense has ballooned by 60 percent over the past 10 years. The fiscal year 2011 budget request also includes an additional \$182 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The accumulated costs of these wars now total more than \$1 trillion.

The media and politicians have made an expanding military budget into a manhood test for civilian leaders. But a real test of a leader's wisdom and strength would recognize that more spending does not equal greater security.

The president defends his decision to grow the Pentagon's budget because he is concerned about the strains on our troops and their families. That is a valid concern. Since the end of the Cold War, but especially since Sept. 11, huge increases in spending haven't closed the gap between the forces we have and the enormous missions with which we have saddled them.

But ultimately, because our national security rests on our economic health as well as on the strength of our military, a liberal and a libertarian can agree that the Pentagon should no longer get a pass. Congress must stop funding projects to satisfy parochial domestic interests. The Pentagon must stop buying weapons systems that are already outdated, unworkable or both. And the administration must carefully define our vital security interests, reshape our grand strategy to more equitably distribute the burdens of policing the globe and reduce the occasions when our military will be called on to fight.

Some cuts are easy, and they certainly would not undermine our security or endanger our troops in the field. Consider, for example, the spending that is driven chiefly by domestic politics — the bases, factories and depots that provide jobs for some Americans but not security for all Americans. The FY 2010 Pentagon budget included an estimated 1,720 earmarks totaling \$4.2 billion. The correct number should be zero.

Then there is the problem of poor performance and mismanagement. A recent Government Accountability Office study found that defense contractors have consistently failed to complete the most important weapons systems within their original budgets, and these systems are delivered, on average, two years behind schedule. Ninety-five major systems exceeded their original cost estimates by a total of \$295 billion from 2001 through 2007.

But eliminating the cost overruns and imposing more stringent oversight of public funds

won't generate enormous savings in the grand scheme of things. Substantial reductions in U.S. military spending can come about only if we fundamentally change our approach to foreign policy. For nearly two decades, Republicans and Democrats in Washington have deployed the U.S. military as a police force of first resort. Now is the time for a change.

The just-issued Quadrennial Defense Review takes a few steps in this direction. But the defense budget could take many, many more. A range of programs and procurement habits survive on inertia and local politics but do not fit into the 21st-century vision of national defense or flat out don't work. Here are just three:

Our deployment of nuclear weapons in a triad — bombers, land-based intercontinental ballistic weapons and submarine-launched missiles — was developed during the Cold War, when we had more than 10,000 warheads and were facing an adversary with even more. But nuclear weapons are useless against terrorists and irregular fighters. As we negotiate with the Russians to make deep cuts in our arsenals, the strategic triad should become a dyad, and costly manned bombers should get out of the nuclear business.

Axing just one of the four additional F-22s — which the administration says it does not need — would save more than \$200 million. That could provide a year's worth of counseling for 49,000 veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome and other psychological problems.

Canceling the purchase of one Virginia-class submarine (cost: \$2 billion) would fund the first year of base pay for 117,000 new enlistees.

While the public strongly supports our military and its missions, it is also hungry for change. Most Americans want to be engaged in the world without having to be in charge of it. Recognizing that a significant portion of our military spending doesn't in fact relate to our national security would, in fact, be quite a test of manhood. Even by Washington standards.

Heather Hurlburt is executive director of the National Security Network. Christopher Preble is director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute.