

Defense Budget Dreaming: Sensors, Audits, and Wal-Mart

The \$553 billion budget that the Pentagon will unveil today puts us in mind of a Radiohead song: no alarms and no surprises. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Adm. Mike Mullen already revealed much of its content during his “efficiencies initiative” briefing last month: no more swimming tank for the Marines, no more awesomely-named SLAMRAMM air defense system for the Army, a new long-range bomber for the Air Force, an arrested rate of growth in defense spending down the road. Gates and Mullen will fill in the details this afternoon.

But inevitably, a lot of good ideas are going to be left on the table, either because of politics, lack of imagination or general inertia. Some of the most left-field suggestions that you’re unlikely to see in the fiscal year 2012 defense budget? Flooding infantry squads with sensors or drones. Auditing the Pentagon. And shutting down the military’s faux Wal-Marts.

Retired Maj. Gen. Robert Scales still can’t quite believe that the Army and Marine Corps haven’t reoriented their entire focus around their smallest units after nearly a decade of ground combat. In October, Scales, one of the Army community’s top futurists, published a provocative *Armed Forces Journal* article criticizing the Army for using the “same lousy rifle” and other gear for its infantry squads as he used in Vietnam. His point is that the military is likely to face tactically proficient enemies like guerrillas and insurgents, and the technological superiority of the U.S. military isn’t sufficiently filtering down to the frontline units that confront them.

In particular: it’s time for those units to be drowning in portable sensor and communications gear, he tells Danger Room.

“No small unit should ever go into an ‘in extremis’ situation without the ability to detect individuals out to mortar range (1,000 meters) and individual soldier intent out to max small arms range (400 meters),” Scales emails. It’s “immaterial” how all that gets done — “could be drones, could be individual soldier sensors” — but it’s important that it be done within the squad itself. Right now in Afghanistan, for instance, ground commanders partner with Air Force units or special task forces to get manned or unmanned spy planes overhead to see beyond the next ridge.

Something else the squads need, in Scales’ view, is some way of networking each of their soldiers together. The Army’s Nett Warrior program, which builds a wearable mobile computer into a soldier’s kit, is still years away, and none of the services currently equip their troops with smartphones or tablets. Scales himself is a fan of building social networking tools into soldier helmets, but right now he’s calling attention to the disconnectedness more broadly. “We find soldiers in close combat unable to ‘touch’

those around him,” he says. “A simple problem yet to be solved in an era when every teenager tweets a thousand times a day.”

An earlier version of soldier networking, known as Future Combat Systems, became a casualty of its ballooning costs in 2009. That’s why two defense budget hawks, Winslow Wheeler of the Center for Defense Information and Chris Preble of the Cato Institute, say that the time has come for a simple idea: auditing the Pentagon. It’s not a new proposal — there’s even a website set up to push it — but they argue that the Defense Department can forget about getting its acquisitions process under control without it. “We can’t know if we’re spending wisely if we don’t know where the money goes,” Preble says.

Speaking of money, one military intelligence veteran who requested anonymity says it’s long past time for the military to get out of the supermarket and recreation market — so that it can open up to commercial vendors at a steep pay-to-play markup. In the Army and the Air Force, post exchanges are run by a two-star general and not a businessman, whose responsibilities include keeping the latest video games on the base stores’ shelves. There’s a moneymaking opportunity in there somewhere.

“Tell food and supermarket chains, ‘Look... you can set up on base and overseas and get your monopoly on, but you will pay [the Defense Department] for the privilege,’” says the intelligence vet. “Then bleed them for said privilege.” That’s a novel method for finding “efficiencies.”

Another proposal of his that probably won’t be in Gates’ next budget is aimed squarely at trimming the perks of privilege for the Pentagon’s top layer of bureaucrats. “Assign 10 GMC Yukons to the Pentagon,” he says, so that “you ride the Metro home” if you can’t demonstrate that you’re super-crucial enough to get a ride at taxpayer expense. Only the secretary and the chairman would have dedicated vehicles, and they could “leave someone on the steps of the E-Ring to hammer the point home.”

That’s surely a pipe dream, and definitely an impish one. Scales’ proposals are far more weighty, as he sees an urgency to this budget, probably Gates’ last. “This may be the last opportunity to at last reform the American military from the bottom up,” Scales says. We’ll see later today if and how Gates seizes it.

Photo: U.S. Air Force