



## Bursting the Pentagon Spending Bubble

*To make America safer, we need to get military costs under control.*

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July 12, 2016

Next year the White House will have a new occupant, but one thing is almost certain not to change: a U.S. foreign policy driven by mind-boggling sums of taxpayer money. With the exception of Bernie Sanders, all the major-party presidential candidates during this election season have said they would oppose military spending cuts. Even the relatively non-interventionist Sen. Rand Paul wanted to bust the military spending caps put into place by the Budget Control Act of 2011, while the other Republican candidates essentially fought over who wanted to increase spending most.

Donald Trump, the presumptive GOP nominee, left no doubt that he intends to keep the military gravy train rolling. Trump may have said that President George W. Bush lied about Iraq (a war that he claims, falsely, to have been publicly against since the start) but he has nonetheless earned the endorsements of former Vice President (and Hawk in Chief) Dick Cheney; interventionist former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton, and Arizona Sen. John McCain, a man who has rarely met an international problem he does not want to fix with American force.

Don't count on presumptive Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton to cut Pentagon spending, either. Clinton's track record of supporting more and bigger interventions paid for with a growing military budget makes her virtually indistinguishable from the Republican White House hopefuls. As **reason's** Nick Gillespie put it, "a vote for Hillary is a vote for war."

Sadly, the American public is also warming up to the idea of more military spending. A recent Pew Research Center poll found that 35 percent say the U.S. should increase spending on national defense; that's a 12 percentage-point hike just since 2013. As Pew notes, "Most of the increase has come among Republicans. Fully 61% of Republicans favor higher defense spending, up 24 percentage points from 2013."

Members of Congress and Pentagon officials talk as if our military is dangerously depleted after two long, taxing wars. While certain programs may face shortfalls, the current \$585 billion the

U.S. spends on "defense" is not just up—a lot—since the turn of the millennium; it's also more than the military budgets of China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, France, Britain, and India combined.

That \$585 billion figure understates the actual taxpayer cost of maintaining the United States' global military presence, because it excludes many of the security-related items that are paid for outside of the Department of Defense (DOD), such as homeland security, aid to veterans, and the nuclear arsenal. In any given year, these expenditures can add \$300 billion or more to overall national security costs.

So why the freakout over how "little" we're spending? Pentagon funding has indeed been cut from a peak of \$692 billion in 2011. With America winding down the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, that makes sense—unless you're in one of the many interest groups that feed off that spending.

There's also an exaggerated sense that the security of individual Americans is existentially threatened. Both Democrats and Republicans on the campaign trail contribute to this collective anxiety. "We live in a complex and dangerous world!" Clinton told a March rally in Seattle. Speaking before the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in February 2015, former Republican candidate Jeb Bush insisted that America needs "a military equal to *any* threat," while Marco Rubio's campaign website informed us that the "world has never been more dangerous than it is today" and that "Nothing matters if we aren't safe."

This is crazy. The United States has wide oceans to the east and west and friendly neighbors to the north and south, and is decidedly not at risk of being invaded by its enemies any time soon. And as Micah Zenko and Michael A. Cohen pointed out in *Foreign Affairs* last November, Americans are more likely to be crushed to death by their televisions and furniture than to be killed in a terrorist attack.

These incessant calls for more spending aren't really about making us safer. The buildup is aimed at projecting American military superiority while keeping as many people as possible in comfortable jobs. "To any other country on the planet, it would be horribly redundant to have a Department of 'Defense' and a Department of Homeland Security," says Chris Preble, the Cato Institute's director of foreign policy studies. "In the United States, it has become routine."

Even if you believe the world is more dangerous now than ever before, it's still possible to acknowledge that not every dollar spent on national security actually makes us more secure. The DOD isn't immune to the inherently political budget allocation process that plagues other agencies, resulting in bad investments and ceding shameful undue influence to industry lobbyists.

As *The New York Times* recently noted, this explains why, following a 50 percent increase in military spending in real terms since 2001, the number of active duty and reserve troops is *down* 6 percent.

It also explains why, even as our troops were fighting two wars, billions of dollars were being wasted on useless items like the F-35 jet fighter. Lockheed Martin started developing a nuclear-capable fighter jet in 2001. A decade and a half later, the airplane still isn't fully operational. The project has already run more than 100 percent over budget, and it is expected to cost north of \$1.5 trillion. But as Mike Fredenburg wrote at *National Review* in July 2015, "For this trillion-dollar-plus investment we get a plane far slower than a 1970s F-14 Tomcat, a plane with less than half the range of a 40-year-old A-6 Intruder, a plane whose sustained-turn performance is that of a 1960s F-4 Phantom, and a plane that had its head handed to it by an F-16 during a recent dogfight competition."

Buying fewer F-35s than originally planned would be an easy way to achieve savings that doesn't in the least threaten national security. But that sort of pruning isn't ultimately going to be enough.

As in the rest of the federal budget, the share of military spending consumed by health care and pension costs has increased dramatically in recent years. Yet Congress has consistently rebuffed efforts to rein in the unsustainable growth in personnel expenditures. Given that the funds available to support the Pentagon are not unlimited, policy makers are facing a situation where paying our obligations to current and former service members means having less money for other priorities.

Fortunately, claims about how reducing government spending will wreck the economy miss the mark. In a March 2013 study for the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, the Harvard economist Robert Barro and I looked at the impact of across-the-board federal spending cuts (also known as the "sequester"). We found that they would actually improve economic growth over five years, with each \$1 in military spending cuts leading to roughly \$1.30 in increased private spending.

As entitlement costs balloon, our next president faces a difficult task. Everything should be on the table for review, including the Pentagon budget. In the end, downsizing our bloated military could be the very thing that makes this country safer.