



The Right Way To Cut Pentagon Waste

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President-elect Donald Trump has made cutting wasteful defense spending a top priority, specifically targeting federal defense contracts.

He called defense industry leaders to the proverbial woodshed to protest costly projects, including threatening on Twitter to cancel Lockheed Martin's F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and Boeing's contract to build two new Air Force Ones.

These tweets send a strong message, and both Boeing and Lockheed have said they intend to work with Trump to reduce program costs. But significantly reducing bloat in the defense budget will require much more than tweets.

It's a huge challenge, but Trump can draw on a set of policy proposals that enjoy broad, bipartisan support within the think tank community. They include eliminating excess overhead, modernizing the military's pay and benefits system and overhauling its weapons acquisitions process.

Such reforms will require support from Congress, no guarantee since most proposed changes target entrenched interests. But in just the few months since his election, Trump has shown how to use the bully pulpit against major defense contractors. If he uses the same tactics against wavering lawmakers, he could create a robust coalition that finally trims waste in the defense budget and modernizes the military.

Trump should adopt a comprehensive plan to cut bloat at the Pentagon. Here's how.

Trump made a smart choice in selecting South Carolina Rep. Mick Mulvaney to be the next director of the Office of Management and Budget. From that position, Mulvaney could impose the sort of budget discipline that he could only advocate as a member of Congress.

What would a smart plan to eliminate wasteful and unnecessary military spending look like? First, Congress should close unneeded bases. Despite broad support from the most senior military officers for such a move, lawmakers have refused to allow it. Members focus on parochial concerns, but they should consider the national interest in a more effective defense.

Base closures will help the Pentagon tackle another vexing problem: A civilian workforce that has grown too large relative to the number of men and women serving on active duty. The Pentagon now employs some 60 civilians for every 100 uniformed personnel, the highest ratio ever. And the civilian contractor workforce is nearly as large.

Reforming the military's pay and benefits system would also reap long-term savings and bring a woefully out-of-date system into the 21st century.

Lastly, if reforming procurement turns out to be Trump's hobby horse, he shouldn't expect a Congress full of yes men. Few people dispute that the Pentagon spends a lot of money on hardware, but everyone disagrees on how to get more bang for the buck. Congress often forces the Pentagon to buy weapon systems it doesn't need or want. And the process used to determine the requirements for new weapons, and the regulations imposed on delivering them, leads to rampant cost growth. Trump should look into easing regulations and, as his tweets imply, demand strict accountability on costs.

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