



Ready to Cut Military Spending

Scott Rasmussen | October 1, 2012

In July presumptive Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney wrote an open letter to Barack Obama slamming the president for considering Pentagon cuts. “Your insistence on slashing our military to pay the tab for your irresponsible spending could see over 200,000 troops forced from service,” Romney warned. “It will shut the doors on factories and shipyards that support our warfighters, take a heavy toll on the guard and reserves, and potentially shutter Virginia military bases. It will shrink our Navy below a level that is already not adequate for protecting our national security.” Romney, by contrast, promises to spend at least 4 percent of gross domestic product on defense every year during his tenure.

Republicans who demand cuts in every program except the military open themselves up to justifiable Democratic charges of hypocrisy. Exempting major budget categories from spending discipline is a key reason government almost never gets cut. The American people are ready to take a more mature approach. A 2011 poll conducted by my firm, Rasmussen Reports, found that 67 percent favor finding spending cuts in all government programs. Every budget item, Americans emphatically believe, needs to be on the table.

A Difficult Discussion

National security is a difficult topic to discuss in mere budgetary terms, since Americans are understandably uncomfortable with putting a price tag on safety. As Ronald Reagan once put it, “Defense is not a budget issue. You spend what you need.”

Reagan’s attitude was correct in one basic sense: If we can’t defend the nation, nothing else matters. But it is also important to remember that he was speaking in a particular place and time. Recognizing that the Soviet economy could not keep up with the more vibrant U.S. economy, he was seeking to put financial pressure on the communist empire and hasten its collapse. That Reagan succeeded is one of the reasons we can consider different approaches in the 21st century.

Today we face no rival superpower with massive military capabilities and aggressive ambitions. Threats of terrorism and cyberwarfare are real but stem mostly from small cells, rather than large blocs of countries. Still, defense

spending questions are hard to discuss because most Americans hold a jumble of conflicting emotions and perceptions that cloud the debate and shift the focus to almost everything except money.

As a starting point, Americans are proud of their country and hold its armed forces in high regard. Seventy-nine percent would rather live here than anywhere else, and at a time of deep cynicism about large institutions 81 percent have a favorable opinion of the U.S. military.

Yet this respect and admiration for the troops co-exists with doubts about the jobs they've been asked to do. Most voters now believe it was a mistake for the U.S. to have gotten involved in Iraq, and most now want to see troops brought home quickly from Afghanistan. Support for the military action in Libya peaked at 20 percent.

Americans are also in a mood to dramatically reduce our security guarantees for other nations. Less than half (49 percent) believe the U.S. should remain in its bedrock military alliance, NATO. Out of 54 countries with which Washington has signed mutual-defense treaty obligations, plus two others (Israel and Mexico) that receive our implicit backing, a majority of Americans supports defending just 12. Countries that don't reach the 50 percent threshold include our oldest ally, France, along with Japan, Poland, and Denmark. The only four countries that 60 percent of Americans are willing to defend are Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Israel.

These findings highlight the central 21st-century gap between the citizenry and its political class. Three out of four Americans believe U.S. troops should never be deployed for military action overseas unless vital national security interests are at stake. Yet the last several presidents have adopted far less restrictive criteria for sending troops abroad. The military is often dispatched for humanitarian purposes or in the belief that the U.S. should police the world, but only 11 percent of voters believe Uncle Sam should play global cop.

Despite how some may interpret these numbers, voters are not isolationists. They still want Washington to play a leading role in world affairs; they see their country as a force for good and reject those who tend to blame America first for the planet's woes. But citizens equally reject the default Washington position that we should respond to international crises by sending Americans first. Instead, voters are seeking a strategy that might best be described as Protect America First. If the military is successful in its core duty of protecting the nation, they believe, our other national assets will win over hearts and minds around the globe.

This mix of public attitudes suggests it is possible to develop a popular 21st-century defense strategy that will support the troops and protect the nation while reducing annual military spending by hundreds of billions of dollars.

What We Spend Now

In 2010 the federal government spent more than \$875 billion on national defense and veterans' affairs, around one-fourth of the federal budget. That figure included about \$160 billion for overseas contingency operations, which consisted mostly of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, plus \$155 billion for the direct costs of military personnel and \$31 billion to care for "wounded, ill, and injured" service members and their families. Veterans' benefits and services total about \$125 billion, including \$45 billion for health care. Maintaining a military with 1.4 million active-duty personnel, it turns out, is expensive.

In addition to military personnel and veterans, the national security budget includes nearly 800,000 civilian personnel. That number does not include the people working for the Department of Homeland Security and other defense-related agencies.

For most people, these numbers are simply too big to fathom. One way of contextualizing the cost is by looking at how fast the national security budget has grown during the last decade. In 2001, the year of the horrific 9/11 terrorist attacks, the federal government spent about \$350 billion on defense and veterans' affairs. If that spending had kept pace with the growth in population and inflation, it would total about \$481 billion today. Current spending is 82 percent higher than that. It is no surprise that defense budgets increased after 9/11, but it is legitimate to ask if an 82 percent hike was the right amount.

Military spending today, adjusted for population and inflation, is higher than it was when Ronald Reagan left office—a time when the Soviet empire was still pointing nuclear weapons at U.S. cities. It is higher than it was in 1968, when the U.S. was fighting both the Cold War and a deadly hot war in Vietnam. Although Americans will support spending whatever it takes to defend the country, polling suggests they don't realize how much we're spending right now.

Only 58 percent of voters are aware that the United States spends more on defense than any other country in the world. And just 33 percent recognize that Washington spends roughly as much on defense as the rest of the world combined. Military spending has grown disproportionately compared to Americans' own priorities, dwarfing other countries in ways that could soon make taxpayers blink.

Consider: The United States spends more than \$2,500 per person on national defense; Russia and our NATO allies each spend about one-fifth that amount, at a time when only 46 percent of Americans have a favorable view of NATO. In the aggregate, while the U.S. is spending close to \$900 billion a year on the military and veterans' affairs, China is coughing up less than \$200 billion. North Korea, Iran, and Syria combined spend less than \$30 billion. The Pentagon spends more just on research and development than Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and Japan each spend on their entire defense budgets, according to Cato Institute Vice President Christopher A. Preble's 2009 book *The Power Problem*. If we are at risk militarily, it is certainly not for a lack of spending.

Adm. Mike Mullen, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in 2010 that “the most significant threat to our national security is our debt.” The American people agree: 82 percent believe the economy is now a bigger concern than military challenges. Sooner rather than later, defense spending will have to come back in line with voter desires.

What to Cut

As with just about every aspect of the federal budget crisis, the main question is whether the political class will continue pursuing its own agenda or be forced to accept the commonsense wisdom of the American people. Following the logic of the public’s strategic preferences would lead to tremendous savings on defense.

Americans, like their political representatives, are not isolationists; 88 percent say the country’s relationship with Europe is important, for example, and 53 percent say it’s “very” important. Voters have no expressed desire to retreat from our historical idealism and sympathy for people who believe in liberty and freedom. It’s just that the citizenry rejects the political class’s post–Cold War approach to pursuing these ideals.

A Protect America First policy would mean returning to the more restrained military philosophies of Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan. Those presidents did not hesitate to use force, but they had a more limited definition of when it was appropriate: only when vital U.S. interests were at stake.

Reagan articulated additional restrictions. Forces should not be sent without “the clear intent and support needed to win,” or without “clearly defined and realistic objectives.” And there “must be reasonable assurance that the cause we are fighting for and the actions we take will have the support of the American people and Congress.” Even when those criteria were met, Reagan emphasized that “our troops should be committed to combat abroad only as a last resort.” Although the Gipper himself occasionally fell short of those ideals (circumventing Congress in Central America, for example), Americans today firmly back the guidelines he spelled out.

Aligning U.S. military strategy with public opinion would save trillions of dollars during the coming decade and dramatically reduce the debt burden we are imposing on future generations. This important realignment would put us in a better position to deal with the serious economic challenges facing the nation and reaffirm the bedrock American notion that governments derive their only just authority from the consent of the governed.

Still, it won’t be easy, given the emotions and vested interests involved. One way to tackle the problem is by breaking defense spending into its constituent chunks:

Supplemental Budget Requests. The supplemental budget for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq cost the United States \$163 billion in 2010 and \$181 billion

in 2011. The Obama administration plans to reduce this number to about \$118 billion in 2012.

Most Americans have decided that it's time to bring these troops home within a year, much faster than either major political party currently contemplates. While such a withdrawal would need to take battlefield concerns into account, bringing policy more in line with public desires could save hundreds of billions of dollars.

Baseline Military Budget. General military spending, or the baseline budget, totaled about \$530 billion for 2011. The only way to substantially reduce that number is through strategic cuts in troop levels and deployments, which could take years and may not begin to show up in reduced budgets for five or 10 years.

Still, the biggest savings available here can be found in the yawning gap between the 56 nations we are obliged to protect and the 12 countries a majority of Americans supports defending. If the global mission is reduced, the cost will be too. Simply put, fewer troops are needed to defend the United States than are needed to police the world. Just bringing home U.S. troops currently deployed in Western Europe and Japan would result in direct savings of about \$25 billion per year.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates acknowledged in 2010 at the Navy League's Sea Air Space Exposition "the massive overmatch the U.S. already enjoys," asking: "Do we really need 11 carrier strike groups for another 30 years when no other country has more than one? Any future plans must address these realities." A Protect America First strategy would concentrate fleets closer to home and reduce the number of aircraft carriers, airplanes, submarines, support staff, and sailors.

All of these changes would reduce procurement budgets because the military wouldn't need as many new weapons, ships, and aircraft each year. Considering that there are more than 80 weapons systems that cost more than \$1 billion a year, reducing procurement would lead to real savings overnight. Training and recruiting costs would also go down, as would administrative costs and the number of civilian support personnel.

Veterans' Affairs. If we cut back on the number of soldiers today, we cut back on the number of veterans we need to serve in the future. If we suffer fewer casualties now, we will have fewer disability payments, lower medical costs, and fewer survivors' benefits in the future.

It sounds pretty basic, and it is. But the impact is huge. By reducing the number of soldiers today, we will reduce the total spending burden we are passing on to future generations by trillions of dollars. Consider these facts, from Cato's Christopher Preble: "Of the 700,000 men and women who served in the Gulf War, 45 percent filed for disability benefits, and 88 percent of these requests were approved. On average, disabled Gulf War veterans receive \$6,506 every year; this

amounts to \$4.3 billion paid out annually by the U.S. government.” That’s the cost paid every year for veterans of just one military engagement.

The savings won’t show up right away in reduced budgets, since today’s budget reflects the price we pay for yesterday’s veterans. But as with other unfunded liabilities, that accounting issue says more about the faulty way we measure federal budgets and deficits than it does about the magnitude of the savings.

Even with all these reductions, the U.S. would enjoy an unmatched capability in military strength and technology.

A New Balance

By reducing the number of strategic commitments in places such as Europe and Japan, we can return military spending to 2001 levels, adjusted for population and inflation. Some might balk at setting targets for defense spending and then expecting the military to fit within those parameters, but that’s exactly what Dwight Eisenhower did in the 1950s. Ike recognized the need to balance military power with domestic resources. It would be irrational to demand that the military continue policing the world with a reduced budget, but it is quite rational to expect the military to accomplish the narrower mission of Protect America First with a budget appropriate for that role.

These reductions would still allow around \$420 billion in annual military spending, nearly three times as much as what China or anybody else in the world currently shells out. And that spending level would be much more in line with voter preferences. If anything, it might be a bit on the high side: Just 25 percent of voters believe the United States should always spend at least three times as much as any other nation; 40 percent think such a target is excessive.

Once the initial cutbacks and savings have been fully implemented over five to 10 years, it would be essential to set in place some long-term budgetary discipline within a more rational federal spending outlook. As long as the strategic environment remains the same, annual military spending increases should be pegged to population growth and inflation. If a new military rival emerged, obviously, it would be time for a new strategic assessment. But as of 2012 it’s difficult to envision a serious military rival that could threaten the territory of the United States.

There is no magic to choosing the 2001 defense budget as a starting point, but it does have the advantage of clarifying the strategic choices. If we spend as much today as we did in 2001 but reduce our legacy commitments from the World War II era, we could cut overall spending levels while devoting additional resources to fighting the challenges of the post-9/11 world.

The specifics of how to recalculate defense spending should be the focus of intense debate and experimentation. Voters clearly believe the focus should be

more on defending the United States rather than the whole world. Substantial resources would still be deployed to address the terrorist threat and probably also to help secure the southern border of the United States.

Many on both sides of the partisan and ideological divides will be unhappy with this approach to military spending. That's especially true of a political elite that supports the Send Americans First status quo. For them, there is a simple solution: If you don't like the Protect America First strategy, go to your boss, the American people. If there are arguments to be made for a wider U.S. engagement and for interventions in places such as Libya, make them. If there are reasons to leave U.S. troops in Europe forever, state them. If we need to spend more, build support for the taxes needed to finance that spending.

But don't sacrifice America's greatest asset—our commitment to self-governance—to pursue a far more aggressive and costly military strategy than the American people are willing to support. Americans have rejected Washington's bipartisan foreign policy. It's time for politicians to take the hint.