



Defense Cuts? Don't Believe it Until you See Them

By Mark Engler, *Dissent Magazine*

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One upshot of the debt-ceiling debate is that politicians might finally be ready to trim the outrageously bloated U.S. military budget. That's the story, anyway, being told by the Washington Post. The paper reported: "[A]s lawmakers and the White House move closer to a grand bargain that could reshape the country's fiscal priorities, Pentagon budget planners are...girding for the possibility that they will have to reduce projected spending by as much as \$800 billion over the next 12 years."

Certainly, it would make sense, in a time when conservatives are insisting on austerity, that the military—a huge and pork-laden area of discretionary spending—would be on the table. But there's a good rule of thumb about defense cuts: Don't believe them until you see them.

The Nation's Robert Dreyfuss is optimistic that real cuts will be in the offing. In a piece entitled, "Defense on the Chopping Block," he wrote: "Now, it appears that Obama is backing cuts as much as \$886 billion, and that might just be an opening bid." Of hawkish conservatives who are warning against reductions in Pentagon spending, Dreyfuss wrote:

It's okay to laugh at their contention that the military is being "stretched thin" after a decade of unbridled expansion and a doubling of military spending since 2000, not even counting Iraq and Afghanistan. But they're right that cuts are coming.

This argument is one that Dreyfuss has been making throughout the year. In January, he suggested that "deficit-minded Republicans and the incoming class of Tea Party types" would result in squeezed military budgets, and again in March he contended that a "politics of debt and deficit reduction [that] has taken hold in Washington, tied to an economic crisis that has convinced many that the United States can no longer afford an oversized Pentagon," will force down defense spending.

Again, this position seems plausible. But, in practice, talk of cuts to the military has a way of evaporating when it comes time for appropriations. There are several reasons for continuing skepticism.

First, the military and its hawkish defenders are very effective at pulling a sleight of hand with their budget projections. Every year, the Pentagon puts in a request for a big funding increase. Then, if politicians offer anything less than that, the hawks portray it as a cut.

We saw this with Paul Ryan's budget proposal. The media highlighted conservative willingness to slash even sacrosanct programs, and the Republican proposal supposedly

included billions in cuts that had been preemptively proposed by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. Yet, as the libertarian Cato Institute pointed out in frustration, the budget in question was only a “cut” in the sense that it did not fully fund every item on the military’s wish list. It actually proposed an \$8 billion increase in the Pentagon base budget over the previous year.

The bill that ended up passing the conservative-controlled chamber showed even less restraint. On July 8, after a year of Tea Party ascendancy, the House passed a defense appropriations bill that included a \$17 billion budget increase for the Pentagon. So much for austerity.

Viewed in this light, a quote Dreyfuss included in his March article is revealing:

“Five years from now, we’ll turn around and the defense budget will be a lot lower than we thought it was going to be five years ago, and we’ll look back and say, Wow,” says Gordon Adams, a Stimson Center fellow and American University professor who’s been analyzing military spending for four decades.

If you read carefully, you’ll notice that “a lot lower than we thought it was going to be” does not necessarily entail actual cuts. It could just as easily mean slower increases.

The politics of defense pork make this latter outcome the more likely of the two. Many Republicans fervently denounced stimulus spending by the Obama administration and campaigned last fall against socialistic government jobs programs. But when it comes to federal funding for defense contractors and military bases in their home districts, they quickly turn around and paint any stemming of government dollars as unwise and unpatriotic. I noted one example in an article I wrote for the Guardian in February:

Congressman Howard “Buck” McKeon of California, for instance, attacked White House stimulus spending, arguing, “Congressional Democrats and the administration continue to insist that we can spend our way out of this recession and create jobs, but the numbers just don’t add up.” Yet in 2010 alone, he secured \$24.2m in defense earmarks for his district, which includes the city of Palmdale, known as the “aerospace capital of America,” where over 9,000 employees rely on Pentagon largesse for their jobs.

It’s not just long-time defense boosters like McKeon. In May, a Capitol Hill Blueheadline read, “Tea Party-backed GOP freshmen pack defense bill with pork.” The article highlighted the actions of Illinois Representative Bobby Schilling, who pushed for \$2.5 million in weapons and technology funding for the Rock Island Arsenal—a facility in his district—even after having criticized his Democratic opponent in last year’s election for directing funds to the very same institution. Likewise, after Missouri Representative Vicky Hartzler pushed for \$20 million for her district’s Whiteman Air Force Base, she claimed that she didn’t think the ban on earmarks she promoted during her campaign applied to Pentagon

spending.

Think Progress noted other similar examples of hypocrisy from elected officials that had been backed by the Tea Party and cited Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank's observation that "It was probably inevitable that [grassroots] Tea Party activists would be betrayed, but the speed with which congressional Republicans have reverted to business-as-usual has been impressive."

On a final note, it's important to recognize that, while numbers like \$400 billion or \$800 billion sound big, proposed defense cuts of this magnitude are spread out over ten to twelve year periods. In that same time span, the Pentagon base budget alone will total well over \$5 trillion, and that does not include trillions more that will go toward veterans benefits, nuclear weapons, and wars the country is actually fighting. (Appropriations for conflicts like those in Iraq and Afghanistan are not included in the base budget.) What's more, there's no guarantee that something like a 10 percent budget reduction would ever be carried out. Long-term plans for budget cuts often delay the most painful, difficult, and significant cuts until the back end of their schedules—when current policymakers will be least accountable for making them real.

For all these reasons, talk by right-wingers about extending their demands for fiscal discipline even to the military warrants skepticism. When it comes to reining in the Pentagon, seeing is believing.

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