

# THE DURANGO HERALD

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## Follow the money

**Study recommends \$1 trillion in defense cuts**

Article Last Updated; Monday, June 14, 2010 12:00AM

If anyone in Washington is serious about reducing the deficit, he or she will of necessity have to follow the old bank robber's adage and go where the money is. And in the federal budget that means two things: entitlements and defense.

But while defense spending is politically difficult, from a politician's point of view, entitlement programs - principally Social Security and Medicare - are downright dangerous. No elected official wants to explain to a crowd of baby boomers that their retirement benefits are on the block.

Presumably with that in mind, Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., convened an interesting panel with the specific goal of coming up with a reasonable and defensible plan for cutting Pentagon spending. Its recommendations, reported Friday by The Hill, would save as much as \$960 billion over the next 10 years.

But even in these deficit-conscious times, the problem will be getting any of them through Congress. What might be needed is a true alternative tactic.

Frank, chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, is a liberal Democrat. The panel he assembled, however, consists of academics from Washington think tanks representing the entire political spectrum. It includes representatives of such organizations as the Center for Defense Information, the National Security Network, the New America Foundation and the Cato Institute.

The panel's recommendations include buying fewer of the new F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, delaying the development of a new Air Force mid-air refueling tanker, and letting the Navy get along with 230 ships instead of the 313 it wants.

It also would cancel the Marine Corps' controversial V-22 Osprey vertical takeoff and landing craft and its Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle. Army and Marine Corps personnel levels also could be trimmed by cutting back on the number of troops stationed in Europe and Asia and by lowering overall force numbers as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down.

The total number of U.S. nuclear warheads would be reduced to 1,050. Air Force bombers would be retired, and work on the Trident II missile would be halted. The country's nuclear deterrent would rest on 160 Minuteman missiles and seven Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines - each of which carries 24 missiles topped with five nuclear warheads apiece. That still is more than enough destructive power to, in Winston Churchill's phrase, "make the rubble bounce."

The problem, though, is that every one of those programs has defenders in Congress. Some

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are ideologically opposed to defense cuts. Some are fans or admirers of a particular service or weapons system. But for most the objection is simple - jobs.

Defense contracts typically are structured to involve jobs in as many congressional districts as possible. The calculation is cynical and deliberate: Tie a bunch of generally well-paying jobs to a defense program, and not only that district's representative, but the state's whole congressional delegation, has every reason to vote for it.

One strategy would be to nationalize the issue. That was done with several rounds of military base closings in which Congress could not alter the proposal but only vote yes or no.

Another tactic would be to drop or scale back the deficit-reduction goal and spend the money more productively. This idea would redirect the funds away from defense programs, which inject money into areas on a one-time basis, and put it instead into infrastructure programs that would have long-term economic benefits. Think high-speed rail lines, fiber optics, repaired bridges, upgraded medical equipment and education.

Redirecting the almost a trillion dollars could do a lot to boost our long-term economic vitality. And it also could leave it with a more sustainable, 21st-century military.