



July 9, 2010

Heed the voices calling for halt to runaway military spending

When one of the most liberal members of Congress joins forces with the most libertarian member of Congress for a cause that is also supported by a group of far-right Republicans, it's safe to say a political tipping point has been reached.

And so it goes with the United States military budget which, for too long, has been off the table in terms of spirited political debate regarding funding cuts.

The 2010 Pentagon budget towers at a gargantuan level of \$693 billion — more than all other discretionary spending programs in the U.S. combined. In a time of national fiscal crisis, military spending is now rightfully drawing serious scrutiny from all quarters of the political spectrum — not to mention U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who has wanted to trim \$100 billion from the annual budget for well over a year now.

This is all welcome, and the varied voices across the political landscape are what's necessary in identifying the types of cuts that will not compromise our national security, our current military offensives or our global war on terror.

What should be targeted is waste and inefficiency in the form of outdated bases, unnecessary military hardware and personnel. And while that may sound like typical rhetoric, many presumably wise people believe that plenty of such waste exists.

Recently, Congressmen Barney Frank, D-Mass., and Ron Paul, R-Texas — who aren't exactly ideological brothers — penned a joint column calling for cuts in the sections of the budget they feel serve no real purpose in national defense. Frank noted that the U.S. has hundreds of bases in 38 countries that do not, in most of those cases, advance American security.

There are still, for example, 15,000 Marines on Okinawa.

The U.S. spends more now on its military spending than it did during the Cold War — topping the military spending of Russia, China, all the Middle East, all of NATO and all the rest of Europe combined.

It is our spending and military presence in Europe that allows our allies there to spend less on their own defenses and more on social programs which benefit them. The reality is that every dollar spent on the military in our discretionary spending budget is a dollar that does not get spent elsewhere on things like environmental protection and improved health care.

As Rep. Frank noted, if you don't cut the military in a climate of deficit reduction "everything else gets butchered."

Congressmen Frank and Paul are looking to cut about \$100 billion a year over the next 10 years for a \$1 trillion savings. Echoing their sentiments on the need to make tough choices are North Carolina conservative Republican Walter Jones as well as the conservative think tank, the Cato Institute.

Defense Secretary Gates has also called for a sweeping overhaul of Pentagon spending. He wants to not only kill expensive weapons programs but also cut military health care costs and reduce the

number of generals in the ranks.

Gates said his goal was to cut overhead in the Defense Department's nearly \$550 billion baseline budget between 2-3 percent — \$10 billion to \$15 billion per year — starting in fiscal 2012. The savings, he said, would allow the Pentagon to sustain force levels and free up funds for modernization programs.

Interestingly, Gates delivered a budget-cut warning this past May at the Eisenhower Library and Museum in Abilene, Kansas - boyhood home of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. It was Eisenhower who warned about a growing "military-industrial complex" in his Jan. 17, 1961, farewell speech that has become famous for predicting the growing problem of our military's insatiable appetite for funding.

Eisenhower, a five-star general, said that no one in the military ever comes up and says "Let's get rid of something." He also once remarked, "It took the Army 50 years to get rid of horses."

Eisenhower words ring true now more than ever. With Defense Secretary Gates and Congressmen Frank and Paul spearheading a thoughtful examination of military funding with members of the Republican right, it's time for President Barack Obama to do likewise.

The issue of prudent military spending is not about partisanship.

It's about leadership.
