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How to Cut Military Spending

The Sustainable Defense Task Force provided reasonable suggestions.

Kevin Williamson calls the report of the Sustainable Defense Task Force, of which I am a member, a “strange” and “shoddy” document. Allow me to disagree.

Williamson begins by dismissing a quotation from John Podesta (my boss at the Center for American Progress) — “an overall defense strategy that is fiscally unsustainable will fail every bit as much as a strategy that shortchanges the military” — as “of no interest.” Really? Podesta sounded like Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who noted earlier this year that Pres. Dwight Eisenhower believed this country “could only be as militarily strong as it was economically dynamic and fiscally sound.”

He then goes on to dismiss our conclusions because of the composition of the task force, which he says includes “no leading minds from the armed forces or the Pentagon.” Leaving aside the issue of how we could get people actually working for the government to serve on an independent task force, Williamson ignores the fact that two of the members are combat veterans and one (me) has more than 20 years of military and civilian government service in the defense area, including nearly five years administering 70 percent of the defense budget.

Williamson derides our suggestion that \$10 billion a year (or \$100 billion over a decade) could be saved in “command, support and infrastructure” as “magic.” Actually, as we note, the last two secretaries of defense, the Defense Science Board, and the DOD inspector general argue that much more could be saved each year in this area.

He also criticizes us for not discussing entitlement programs and insinuates that we are making the DOD budget bear too much of the burden of deficit reduction. Leaving aside the fact that our task was to focus only on defense spending, we recommended reductions of about \$100 billion a year

in the base defense budget. This amounts to less than 10 percent of the current and projected annual deficit of more than \$1 trillion. Since defense today represents 20 percent of the overall budget (including entitlements), asking the baseline defense budget to bear 10 percent of the deficit reduction is not unfair or unreasonable. Obviously, our members agree that if we are to get out of the current fiscal mess, all spending and taxes must be on the table.

Furthermore, Williamson distorts the role and placement of the report's "logic of restraint" section. It is not, as he contends, the "ideological framework" underlying the recommendations in our report. Rather it is one part of a larger "strategy of restraint" section put forward by two distinguished Cato Institute fellows for even greater savings than those recommended by the task force.

Finally, in examining the major categories of defense reductions we propose, Williamson accuses us of "ideological particularism" (whatever that means) and "wishful thinking." Really? All our recommendations follow ideas that have been put forward by members of the defense establishment within the past year. For example, we recommend reducing the number of strategic nuclear weapons to 1,000. Two faculty members of the Air War College and the chief of the Air Force Headquarters Strategic Plans and Policy Division say the number can be cut to 311.

We recommend cutting the Army and Marine Corps back to their pre-Afghanistan-and-Iraq levels when we withdraw from those theaters because, as Secretary of Defense Gates noted in the May/June 2010 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, "the United States is unlikely to repeat a mission on the scale of those in Iraq and Afghanistan anytime soon — that is, forced regime change followed by nation building under fire."

We also recommend reducing the Navy's fleet to 230 ships and argue that this can be done by reducing the number of aircraft carriers from eleven to nine (something that Secretary Gates has also suggested), reducing the number of strategic ballistic submarines (as recommended by the Air Force personnel mentioned above), and changing the size and frequency of deployments (an option presented by the Navy's think tank, the Center for Naval Analyses).

If all of our recommendations are adopted this year, the baseline defense budget for FY 2011 (excluding war costs) will be reduced to about \$480 billion. In constant dollars, this is substantially higher (by about \$60 billion) than the base FY 2002 budget that President Bush sent to Congress in June 2001, which represented an increase of 11 percent (more than 7 percent real growth) over the last budget of the Clinton administration. This is not bad for a strange and

shoddy report.

— *Lawrence Korb, a former assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration, is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress.*