

Left-Right Defense Wonk Coalition Looks to Cut \$960 Billion From Bloated Pentagon Budget

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By [Spencer Ackerman](#) 6/11/10 10:34 AM

Few communities of Washington wonks run into greater structural and institutional obstacles than advocates of reduced defense spending. Defense companies put billions into PR campaigns for the necessity of this or that project that runs over cost. Legislators have every career incentive to lard the defense budget with job-creating bloat for their districts. The media treats civilian and military spending as two entirely different entities, with military spending emerging from a magical, never-ending fountain of cash. And then there's the general jingoism that equates curbed defense spending with a deficit of patriotism.

But undeterred by all that is a coalition of liberal and conservative defense wonks from the Project on Defense Alternatives, the Center for American Progress, the Cato Institute, Taxpayers for Common Sense, the Center for Defense Information and more. Calling themselves the Sustainable Defense Task Force — thereby taking up the “sustainability” call for budget austerity from Defense Secretary Robert Gates and [his undersecretary for policy \(and likely successor\), Michele Flournoy](#) — they identify up to \$960 billion in spending cuts over ten years. That's in a new report they're releasing this morning.

The cuts don't come from war spending, but from the Pentagon's “base budget”: everything that the department buys or maintains on a regular basis, as opposed to a contingency basis for wartime emergency. Cuts are supposed to come across the board, from nuclear forces, missile defense and space programs (nearly \$200 billion saved over ten years); big service priorities like the Joint Strike Fighter, the KC-X refueling tanker, the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle and the Osprey helicopter (nearly \$90 billion saved over ten years); getting rid of two Air Force tactical fighter wings and cutting the Navy to 230 ships (nearly \$167 billion saved over ten years); reforming DOD's increasingly expensive health care system (nearly \$50 billion saved over ten years); and many, many other canceled, delayed or reformed programs. You can read the full (PDF) report [here](#).

It would be an understatement to say that the cuts identified by the task force run against the ever-upward trajectory of the defense budget. But they also run up against certain priorities of the current Pentagon leadership, even as that leadership goes further than most in sharing the task force's goals. The Joint Strike Fighter and KC-X are priorities. So is maintaining an expanded ground force. But the task force urges the Pentagon to roll back the growth in the Army and Marine Corps as the Iraq and Afghanistan wars end. And while several post-Cold War Pentagon leaders have argued for reducing the U.S.'s garrisoning footprint in Europe and Asia, another task force priority, the diplomatic equities at stake have proven to be a powerful inertial force. And then there's the fact that the House is thumbing its nose at Gates's efforts just to get rid of an engine that the services say they don't want in the Joint Strike Fighter.

But it's one thing to propose specific costs to specific programs. It's another to offer a set of


criteria to identify wasteful spending going forward. That gets into the issues of national strategy that Flournoy discussed in her speech yesterday to the Center for a New American Security. And the task force is happy to oblige, urging policymakers to eschew:

- Department of Defense programs that are based on unreliable or unproven technologies,
- Missions that exhibit a poor cost-benefit payoff and capabilities that fail the test of cost-effectiveness or that possess a very limited utility,
- Assets and capabilities that mismatch or substantially over-match current and emerging military challenges, and
- Opportunities for providing needed capabilities and assets at lower cost via management reforms.

It's that second part, about avoiding poorly thought-out missions, that too rarely gets factored into budget-cutting discussions, as if budgets and strategy aren't mutually reinforcing. But that also adds a political obstacle to an already burdensome task. Flournoy spoke yesterday about avoiding "national security adventurism." The task force isn't just offering not budget discipline. It's offering a way to distinguish adventurism from prudent responses to security threats. Will anyone listen?

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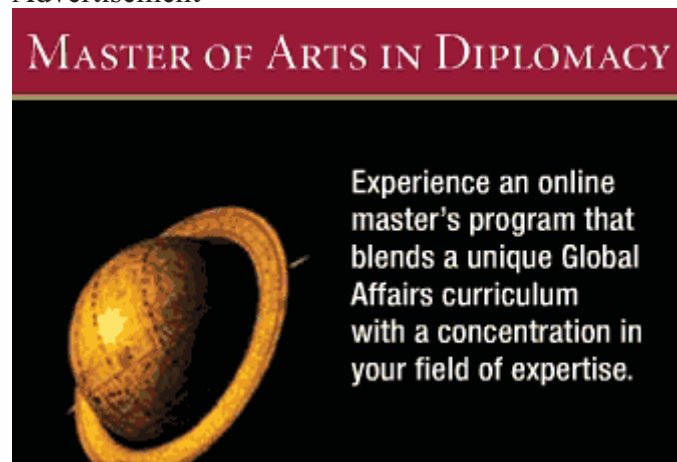
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