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January 3, 2011

Editorial: Mammoth military deficits

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- America's yearly federal deficits are almost too large to comprehend. Washington doesn't live on available tax revenue, but spends more than \$1 trillion beyond its income annually. It's financial insanity.

The colossal overspending has driven the national debt to nearly \$14 trillion. Each year, more than \$400 billion of tax money goes just for interest on the monstrous total.

In the face of such debt, sensible people might consider reducing the nation's gigantic military spending, which almost exceeds the combined total of all other countries. But this prospect rarely is mentioned. Politicians didn't touch the topic during the election campaign.

Robert H. Dorff, a U.S. Army War College professor, recently wrote a commentary titled "Strangely Silent: The Missing Strategic Debate in the 2010 Mid-Term Elections." He pointed out:

The current \$3.83 trillion U.S. budget includes \$2.39 trillion in mandatory spending on people-helping programs like Social Security and Medicare. That leaves \$1.44 trillion for "discretionary spending."

About 60 percent of discretionary spending -- nearly \$900 billion -- goes to the Pentagon, Department of Homeland Security and various overseas military and aid programs.

"Promises to reduce taxes ... must be accompanied by significant reductions in spending, which cannot be accomplished without national security or entitlement spending, or both, being on the table," Dorff said.

The growing costs of waging war in Afghanistan, Dorff warns, are unlikely to be reduced for years. Yet there is little discussion about these central questions.

"It is almost a given that our military will need to be reconfigured in fundamental and significant ways to be effective, affordable and sustainable in its strategic role," he wrote.

America's mammoth military, designed to fight global wars, isn't suited for dealing with today's worst menace: shadow cells of hidden fanatics who want to kill themselves in surprise massacres of civilians.

"Budgetary Savings from Military Restraint," a new paper from the libertarian Cato Institute, argues that America needs "a defense budget worthy of its name, one that protects Americans rather than wasting vast sums embroiling us in controversies remote from our interests."

Cato scholars discourage the endless and costly "occupation of failing states and indefinite commitments to defend healthy ones."

By continuing to pay for the world's largest military, and maintaining a "strange silence" about the size of armed forces, U.S. taxpayers will surely be saddled with debt of stupendous proportions.

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