

# Life by a Thousand Cuts

The United States' defense-spending habit has been out of control for years. Will it ever change?

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BY CHRISTIAN CARYL | JULY 7, 2010



A few years ago I found myself reporting a story about the military buildup on the remote western Pacific island of Guam. Guam happens to be the westernmost territory in the United States, a location that puts it within just a few days' sailing of many potential East Asian flashpoints. One of the people I interviewed was a senior U.S. Navy officer who made the case for expanding base facilities on the island so that they could handle some of the military's biggest ballistic-missile submarines. Among other things, he explained, this was a capability that would beef up America's ability to fight the Global War on Terror. How, exactly? Well, it was simple: These superquiet subs could sneak up close to the coastlines of countries where terrorists were operating and launch mini subs filled with Navy SEALs through their torpedo tubes. The mini subs could then drop the men off on the shore -- a perfect way to surprise the bad guys!

I doubt very much that the officer in question really believed that it made much sense to use an Ohio-class submarine -- a Cold War monster originally designed to unleash a nuclear holocaust on the Soviet Union -- as a glorified Humvee. (By point of comparison, the **current cost** of a boomer of that type would be around \$4 billion a pop -- Trident missiles not included, mind you.) I suspect he was smarter than that; maybe he just didn't want me to think that home-porting ballistic-missile subs far out in the western Pacific had **anything** to do with containing China. And I should note at this point that the Advanced SEAL Delivery System he was talking about has since been quietly shelved -- though less because of its inherent absurdity than the fact that the Navy just couldn't get it to work. Still, the officer's argument made perfect sense within the framework of a political culture that has made having the most advanced military technology an end unto itself -- regardless of any rational cost-benefit analysis.

To anyone who hasn't been paying attention, let's go over it one more time: In February the Pentagon requested \$708.2 billion for fiscal year 2011 -- which would make the coming year's defense budget, adjusted for inflation, **the biggest since World War II**. As one analysis of the budget points out, that would mean that total defense spending -- including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq -- has grown 70 percent in real terms **since 2001**. Defense spending now accounts for some 20 percent of federal discretionary **spending**. That's even more than Social Security.

As a consequence, every year the United States accounts for just under half of the *entire world's* military spending. (By way of comparison, China spends about 8 percent; Russia, 5 percent.) As Benjamin Friedman, a research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, recently noted in **one report**: "The closest thing the United States has to state enemies -- North Korea, Iran, and Syria -- together spend about \$10 billion annually on their militaries -- less than one-sixtieth of what we do."

Now, there are still plenty of people around who believe that the United States is **duty-bound** to spend more on its defense than the next 45 or so countries combined. But let's assume, for the moment, that they're wrong. Let's assume that some members of the

American political elite and electorate at large have concluded that the United States can't remake the planet in its own image, or even keep the world safe for everyone else, by means of a globe-spanning military presence. Let's assume that someone has decided to set some reasonable limits, based on a realistic strategy for what can be achieved by U.S. foreign policy.

Sounds crazy, I know. But there are signs that change might be in the works. For the first time since anyone can remember, a U.S. defense secretary has proclaimed himself a defense-spending skeptic (at least in principle). In his 2010 Pentagon budget, Robert Gates boldly slashed several high-profile, big-ticket weapons programs, including the Army's \$160 billion Future Combat Systems, a \$13 billion package for new presidential helicopters, and the Air Force's **\$140-million-per-plane Raptor F-22 program**. And though his department's request for 2011 hasn't gone to the same lengths, there are still some out there who hope Gates could yet become the new poster child for the Eisenhower tradition of conservative doubts about the "military-industrial complex." But perhaps that's a little premature. Some would-be budget-cutters point out that Gates favors the notion of setting U.S. military spending at a fixed percentage of GDP -- which, they note, would more likely than not leave outlays at a permanently high level.

In fact, say some analysts, the most interesting place to watch is actually Congress. The 18-member deficit-reduction commission, charged by President Barack Obama to reduce the federal budget deficit to less than \$550 billion within the next five years, started its work in April, and it's already becoming the focus of **new discussions** about the continued rationale for America's massive military spending. Voters' angst about the deficit is ratcheting up the pressure on lawmakers to find some untraditional solutions. That pressure is likely to grow as the midterm elections near. Obama is already coming under increasing attack from the anti-war element inside his own party, while the Tea Party movement numbers among its activists **quite a few people** who also apply small-government philosophy to national defense.

There is one group that already provides a glimmer of the potential coalitions that could ensue. The Sustainable Defense Task Force recently released a **comprehensive report** that offers proposals for cutting some \$1 trillion in military spending over the next 10 years, an

overall reduction of some 15 percent. The suggestions include shrinking the U.S. nuclear arsenal, cutting two Air Force fighter wings, reducing the Navy to 230 ships (from 287 at present), and eliminating the Marine Corps' Osprey multimission aircraft program. Such radical cuts wouldn't be possible, of course, without a fundamental rethink of U.S. foreign policy -- which the report duly offers, recommending a stark retrenchment in Washington's overseas commitments.

But what's especially intriguing about the report is the motley crew behind it. They include the famously liberal Rep. Barney Frank, the libertarian Republican Rep. Ron Paul, Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden, and Republican Rep. Walter Jones (yep, the very guy who dreamed up "Freedom fries" in the early George W. Bush years). The sea of federal red ink is spawning **some interesting alliances** -- one that could, down the road, lead to a new coalition capable of reassessing U.S. defense priorities. Establishment conservatives predictably **denounced** the authors of the report as left-leaning pacifists, but much of its intellectual input actually came from the Cato Institute, Washington's leading libertarian think tank.

Indeed, as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan grind on, left-wing defense skeptics are increasingly finding qualified support from their ideological opponents when it comes to questioning the rationale for sky-high Pentagon appropriations. It was a Republican member of the deficit-reduction commission, Oklahoma's Sen. Tom Coburn, who sent a **widely noted letter** to the commission's two chairmen calling for **a stop to any Pentagon funding increases** pending a comprehensive audit of U.S. defense spending. Cato's **Christopher Preble** (a veteran U.S. Navy officer) says that one of the institute's recent conferences outed a wide swath of conservative stalwarts -- including big names like Grover Norquist and California Republican Rep. Dana Rohrabacher -- as Iraq war skeptics. Reason No. 1: the ruinous cost of nation-building overseas. Is this the issue that could bring Tea Party neo-isolationists and liberal anti-war activists together?

To be sure, no one really expects to see the Pentagon embrace fiscal forbearance anytime soon. Too many things still stand in the way. Intellectually, Washington is still under the

sway of a consensus among traditionalist conservatives, activist neocons, and **liberal internationalists**, all of whom share a belief in the presumptive benefits of U.S. hegemony. Psychologically, the threat of "terrorism," broadly defined, still acts as a formidable conversation-stopper. (Just mention "al Qaeda" and you can persuade even the most tightfisted taxpayers to start signing blank checks.) Politically, the defense-establishment lobby -- starting with deep-pocketed companies like Lockheed and Boeing -- exercises vast influence in league with politicians who hail from districts heavy in defense-industry jobs. Friedman, one of the authors of the Sustainable Defense Task Force report, is a self-described liberal who has found **common cause** with the skeptics at Cato. Increasingly, he says, the combination of growing war-weariness and deficit fatigue has the potential to transform the inherited consensus, as long as would-be budget-cutters can change the dominant thinking about the most effective ways to fight terrorism and protect U.S. interests. A few years ago that may have sounded utopian, he says; nowadays, though, the general disgust with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has begun to shift the conversation. "Things are changing," he says. "Gates came out with this proposal to cut \$100 billion from overhead accounts into force structure. There's no reduction in the bottom line, but he's feeling the pressure." He notes that even Norm Dicks, the Democratic chairman of the crucial House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, has been **talking** about the need to cut the Pentagon's budget. The amounts aren't large, but the mere fact, says Friedman, that Dicks "wants credit for defense spending restraint" is evidence of a possible "political wind shift." It all depends, of course, on the outcome of the midterm elections -- and a big Republican win is probably the most likely guarantee of a continued status quo. Traditional Republicans still see hawkishness as a virtue (no matter the cost). And few politicians from either party are likely to welcome the notion of cutting **defense-industry pork in their home districts** in an era of high unemployment. Against that backdrop the notion of a leaner U.S. military, and a more realistic foreign policy, looks likely to remain utopian. But, hey, a guy can dream, can't he?