

YOUR VIEW: Frank deserves credit for push to cut defense spending

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July 01, 2010 12:00 AM

As a member of the Sustainable Defense Task Force that Sean Bielat criticized on these pages ("Defense policy Frank's way would be naive," June 25), I write to respond to his attacks and confusion about U.S. defense policy. As a Massachusetts resident born and raised in the 4th District, I also write to defend Congressman Barney Frank.

Let's first get the facts straight, since Bielat didn't. Frank organized an intentionally diverse group of defense policy experts to find ways to save money in the Pentagon budget (a goal Bielat supports) and cut the deficit. We came up with possible cuts totaling almost \$100 billion a year for 10 years. Frank did not tell us what to include and does not endorse everything we did. With Republicans Walter Jones of North Carolina and Ron Paul of Texas, he is circulating a letter for his colleagues' signature saying they will not vote for any deficit reduction package without defense spending cuts.

The congressman did all this because no one else had. Given his labors with financial services legislation, and the likelihood that the report would invite cheap shots from the right, he deserves great credit for leading the charge.

Bielat says that Frank isn't qualified to talk about defense because he never served in the military, got an advanced degree on the subject or worked in the defense industry.

We should all honor the service of Marines like Bielat. We shouldn't ignore his views on defense spending because he is a defense contractor. But we should not leave decisions to defense spending to those that live off it. The truth is that decisions about defense spending have been dominated by those that fit Bielat's expertise criteria. What that has gotten us is out-of-control Pentagon spending and endless war.

The U.S. defense budget is the business of the American people. We pay for it. The constitution grants our elected representative the power of the purse. We need more representatives who use that power to look after the national interest, rather than chasing bucks for their districts and avoiding responsibility for deficits.

The report ought to be judged by its argument, not its authors. Bielat trashes us, but makes no coherent criticism of the report (it's not clear that he's read it) and does not say what he disagrees with in it.

Bielat says Frank is hypocritical for voting to fund a second engine for the Joint Strike Fighter (not the Joint Strike Force, as Bielat calls it). But he fails to point out that the report calls for canceling the entire aircraft program, including the second engine. Frank supports this recommendation, but argues that if you keep the program, you should have an engine competition to drive down cost.

Bielat says new threats will emerge. We agree. The cuts we advocate amount to only around 20

percent of the non-war budget. That would leave us with a defense budget roughly equivalent, in real, inflation-adjusted terms, to what we spent under President Ronald Reagan in 1982, far higher than in most Cold War years. We would still spend more researching and developing new weapons and vehicles than any nation other than China spends on its entire military.

Bielat implies that we didn't consider China's economic growth when discussing its military spending. But China spends roughly 2 percent of its gross domestic product on its military out of an economy less than one-third the size of ours. We spend almost five percent. Under the doubly unlikely scenario that Congress enacts all our recommended cuts and China's economic output and military spending continue their fast growth, in 20 years, China will still be far behind us in military spending and capability. And the best way to prepare for rivals in the long term is to keep our economy strong and innovative, lessening the burden of spending and debt.

Those of us who want a more restrained defense posture are used to people like Bielat calling us "pacifists" and "isolationists." But the report envisions a nation that fights fewer wars, not none. I cannot speak for all the task force members, but unlike isolationists, I am for increasing trade, immigration and cultural exchange. I want the United States to engage the world without dominating it with our military.

Bielat attacks task force member Paul Martin for being an environmentalist who works for Peace Action and wants "philosophical change at the Pentagon." Apparently Bielat thinks that such views make you a heretic that serious people should ignore. Barney Frank apparently disagrees, having noticed that current philosophy has our military playing the fiscally reckless role of policing the world and fighting endless occupational wars that provide no clear benefit to Americans.

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