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Again and again, just when you think you've reached maximum possible cynicism about politics, you discover that, actually, you haven't been cynical enough. It's almost always worse than you think.

You've probably heard that what President Obama trumpeted as "the biggest annual spending cut in history" was nothing of the sort. The purported cuts -- \$38 billion from a federal budget \$1.4 trillion in the red -- were pathetic enough at face value.

But according to the Congressional Budget Office, the real total for this year is only \$352 million - - with an "m." That, it turns out, wasn't even enough to cover the first six days of bombing Libya, which cost roughly \$400 million.

Two fruitless and expensive wars weren't enough, apparently, so we've now added a third.

We got dragged into Libya by our NATO allies, who aren't competent to run a proper airwar against a crumbling Third-World autocracy, and are now complaining that we're not doing more to bail them out.

It gets worse: Would you believe that we're in this mess largely because of the machinations of a preening French intellectual with friends in high places?

France, you'll recall, was especially eager for war: first to recognize the rebel "government," and first to fire shots over Benghazi. "France has decided to play its part before history," President Nicolas Sarkozy pompously intoned. (Upon hearing that, a friend wisecracked, "How long now till Gaddafi rolls into Paris?").

Credit or blame goes to French celebrity-philosopher Bernard Henri-Levy, who, "in the space of roughly two weeks," the New York Times reports, got "a fledgling Libyan opposition group a hearing from the president of France and the American secretary of state, a process that led both countries and NATO into waging war."

Who is Bernard Henri-Levy (BHL)? He's heir to an industrial fortune, and a crusading socialist who favors open-collared shirts, stylishly long locks and "humanitarian" wars. One critic summed up BHL's persona tartly: "God is dead, but my hair is perfect."

Henri-Lévy's 2006 book, "American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville," was so condescending about America's "derangements," "dysfunctions" and "hyperobesity," it roused NPR's Garrison Keillor to a fit of patriotic ire. The normally placid "Prairie Home Companion" host called BHL "a French writer with a spatter-paint prose style and the grandiosity of a college sophomore."

And yet, BHL - clever boy - helped entangle this fat, silly country in a conflict that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates admits "isn't a vital interest for the U.S." You can't make this stuff up.

Since we turned command over to NATO, the British and French have been running short on laser-guided munitions and pleading with the U.S. to do more heavy lifting.

But if our NATO allies can't get the job done, maybe it's because they've become military "welfare queens," free-riding off America's lavish defense budgets. The U.S. now accounts for nearly 75 percent of NATO members' overall military spending.

What are we doing in NATO anyway? Maybe it made sense in 1949 to put aside our distrust of "entangling alliances" in order to confront the Soviet threat. But that threat disappeared two decades ago.

Today, the alliance's main functions seem to be forcing the U.S. taxpayer to subsidize Europe's generous welfare states, and periodically embroiling us in conflicts, like Kosovo and Libya, that we'd be smarter to avoid.

There are lessons to be learned from the Libyan debacle. For us, the main lesson is that NATO long ago outlived its usefulness. For Europe, it's that foreign adventurism doesn't come cheap. If you think these things are worth doing, pay your own way, and finish the fights you start.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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