



Make Pentagon Savings Part of Budget Negotiations

By Reps. Keith Ellison & Mick Mulvaney - *January 13, 2013*

As members of opposing parties, we often have legitimate differences of opinion on what is best for the country. But differences of opinion do not mean that we cannot work together when our interests align. Earlier this month, we joined a bipartisan group of lawmakers to respectfully ask our leaders to include defense savings in the current budget negotiations. We believe pursuing savings in the Pentagon's budget must be one part of the larger — and critical — effort to improve our nation's fiscal condition.

To argue that the defense budget should be off the table ignores the growth in defense spending—which since 2000 has increased more than a third after adjusting for inflation. We can disagree about the proper amount of defense spending, but it is clear that recent growth has not been tied to strategic needs. It has been, simply, growth for the sake of growth.

Debt is a National Security Threat

By now, most people in Washington have heard the admonition from former Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen: "The single biggest threat to our national security is our debt, so I also believe we have every responsibility to help eliminate that threat. We must, and will, do our part."

We agree. If we thought that achieving savings in the Pentagon's budget would put our troops in harm's way or make us less safe, we would abandon this cause. But we know that achieving defense savings and keeping our nation safe is possible. Smaller defense budgets in the past more than adequately provided for a strong national defense, even during the height of the Cold War.

Even defense industry leaders acknowledge the need to achieve defense savings. Just last week, David Langstaff, president and chief executive of TASC, Inc., said, "We need to stop believing or pretending that there is a scenario out there that offers no defense cuts. The question is whether we make them responsibly or irresponsibly...There will need to be more cuts, but the key point is that they are aligned with the strategy."

Pentagon Cuts Proposed Across the Political Spectrum

We believe there are responsible ways to reduce Pentagon spending. This does not mean issuing troops pink slips or handicapping ourselves by not pursuing every capability that is essential to maintaining our qualitative military advantage. But it does mean, for example, combating waste, fraud and abuse in the Pentagon's budget. A 2011 Government Accountability Office report showed that management failures led to \$70 billion in cost overruns in major weapons systems in just two years. We can do better.

Respected policy organizations across the political spectrum have recently issued proposals that would responsibly achieve defense savings over the next decade. The Cato Institute, the Project on Government Oversight, Taxpayers for Common Sense, the National Taxpayer's Union, the Project on Defense Alternatives and others have released plans to save up to \$550 billion over the next decade.

The deadlines facing Congress present an opportunity to realize these savings. Budgets should be structured around meeting specific military requirements and 21st-century threats, not past spending levels or percentages of GDP. A streamlined Pentagon budget can fund the things that matter most – protecting our troops in the field, caring for them when they come home, and addressing the security threats of our post-Cold War world, such as cyber warfare.

Powell: Pentagon Budget Not Sacrosanct

We encourage members of both political parties to join our efforts to identify smart savings in the Pentagon's budget. You won't be alone. The American people recognize the importance of reining in defense spending to help reduce the national debt.

The true foundation of our military power is not dollars or equipment, but the men and women of our armed forces. As retired four-star general and former secretary of state Colin Powell put it, the Pentagon's budget should not be considered "sacrosanct." We hope defense savings will be considered as part of a larger plan to improve our nation's fiscal condition. Φ

Keith Ellison represents the 5th District of Minnesota in the United States House of Representatives and Co-Chairs the Congressional Progressive Caucus. Rep. Mick Mulvaney represents South Carolina's 5th District. He graduated with honors in International Economics, Commerce, and Finance from Georgetown University.