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Toward a responsible defense budget

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In a [recent article](#) in The Daily Caller, Chet Nagle claims that the Obama administration “plans to eliminate over a trillion defense dollars in the next ten years.” Unfortunately, he has no basis for saying so.

The Department of Defense is one of the only government agencies slated to receive real increases in spending over the next few years, according to the administration’s budget submissions. Nagle pretends that the cuts proposed in [a recent report by the Sustainable Defense Task Force](#) have the administration’s support. This is not the case.

As a member of the task force, I actually wish Nagle were right. Even modest cuts to military spending — which has grown by 86 percent since 1998 — would show that the administration had reconsidered the approach to U.S. military power that has prevailed in Washington since the end of the Cold War. But like the last one, this administration seems to believe that U.S. troops should answer every 911 call, with American taxpayers footing the bill.

Perhaps Nagle was misled by a series of speeches by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, in which Gates questioned the need for expeditionary fighting vehicles when we haven’t landed Marines on a hostile shore since the Inchon landing in September 1950. Perhaps Nagle confused Gates’ pledge to eliminate waste and inefficiency within the Pentagon’s budget as a sign that the secretary was serious about cutting military spending. Far from it; Gates is mainly shifting spending within the Pentagon’s budget. The bottom-line figure continues to grow.

Equally misguided is Nagle’s claim that eliminating the bomber leg of the nuclear triad is a step toward unilateral disarmament. This proposal finds support in a report published by the Air Force Association’s Mitchell Institute for Airpower Studies, not the province of peaceniks and anti-nuclear activists. A separate article published by the chief of the Air Force Strategic Plans and Policy Division and two Air Force War College professors concluded that as few as 311 nuclear warheads would constitute an effective and credible deterrent. The U.S. simply does not need the same nuclear force structure — bombers, missiles, and submarines — that it had during the height of the Cold War.

The key shortcoming of Nagle’s article is his failure to confront the logic underlying our proposed cuts. Most of what Americans think of as “defense” spending isn’t really intended to defend the U.S. Rather, our military is structured toward defending other countries that can and should defend themselves. Sheltered under the American security umbrella, our allies have allowed their own military capabilities to atrophy.

A shift in U.S. grand strategy toward a posture of restraint would enable American taxpayers to recoup considerable savings and force other countries to assume responsibility for their own defense. Restraint would capitalize on the U.S.’s unique advantages, including our open and active political culture, a dearth of powerful enemies, and an abundance of potential partners around the world. Such a strategy would keep Americans safe, and at far less cost.

Too many people, Nagle included, believe that the more you spend on the military the more secure you are. The opposite is closer to the truth. Our astronomical military spending has served chiefly to weaken the U.S. economy, undercutting our future wealth and ability to generate power.

Washington in the early 21st century has allowed our military posture to determine our security requirements, instead of the other way around.

This must change. We can make substantial reductions in military spending over the next ten years — reductions that will actually make us more secure, not less — revisit the purpose of our military power, and refocus our defense strategy on defending the U.S.

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