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Gates Swimming against the Tide

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| [Christopher A. Preble](#) ^[2]

A few key takeaways from Defense Secretary Robert Gates's latest "efficiency" initiative ^[3]:

- The Marine Corps's Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle is being canceled. This was the right decision. The savings are not that significant, given that some of the monies that would have been spent buying new EFVs will be diverted to refitting and upgrading existing landing vehicles. The other piece of bad news for taxpayers: the Defense Department has spent more than \$3 billion on a program that has delivered only prototypes.

- The Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), especially the Marine Corps's Short Take Off/Vertical Landing (STOVL) variant, barely escaped a similar fate. Gates put the STOVL JSF program on a two-year probation to resolve a number of challenges that have cropped up over the course of the development cycle, especially the increases in size and weight that have pushed costs well above initial estimates. This has all the appearances of delaying the inevitable. It is highly unlikely that the many problems will be fixed over the next two years. The only certainty is that the delay will pile additional costs into an already bloated program. Bottom line for the taxpayers: modest overall savings, offset by a delay that will increase per-unit costs over the long term; or, worse yet, a multi-billion dollar program that delivers nothing of value at all.

- Cuts and freezes in civilian hiring and pay. Such reforms make sense, but could go much farther. Personnel expenses -- salary, but especially health care and other benefits -- are the fastest rising portion of the Pentagon's budget. Although Gates announced some programmatic reforms that might help slow the rate of growth, truly getting control of those costs will ultimately entail reducing head count.

- Which brings me to my final point: Gates announced a planned reduction in Army and Marine Corps end strength, beginning in 2015, of up to 47,000, a 6 percent reduction if

fully implemented. As the secretary noted, such cuts would still leave both services at a higher level than when he took office in 2006, and still considerably higher than at the start of the Iraq war.



And that last point begs the question, both with respect to Gates's personnel proposals, and all the rest: Why not more? If the nation's fiscal woes are as dire as the secretary and JCS Chair Adm. Mike Mullen said yesterday (and I believe that they are), and if the Pentagon budget, as the single largest slice of the discretionary pie, should be included in the search for deficit reduction (and I believe it should be), then why does the secretary expect to keep most of the savings that he has identified?

My guess is that he doesn't. He sees this as an initial offering (the second, actually, following his similarly tepid reforms ^[4] offered up last year), intended to fend off even deeper cuts.

The Pentagon's backers, both inside and out, have failed to keep its budget off limits. Members of Congress, including many Republicans, say that everything must be on the table in the search for spending cuts. By proposing a DoD budget for FY 2012 that is larger than that for FY 2011, and by claiming that the Pentagon should continue to receive increases going forward, Secretary Gates is bucking a very strong tide.

The secretary is right about one thing ^[5]: being "the underwriter of security for most of the free world," the task that the civilian masters have assigned to the U.S. military for over 60 years, is a costly enterprise. Efficiency savings in the Pentagon might deliver a few billions in savings here and there, but the only way to achieve serious reductions in military spending is to rethink the military's purpose. Indeed, a major strategic shift ^[6] -- one that contemplates fewer missions to fix failed states, and that ends the decades-long practice of defending healthy ones -- makes sense on its merits; the fiscal pressures merely add urgency to the matter.

Robert Gates has refused to contemplate such a change. The budget cutters in Congress are about to force his hand.

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