

Military spending

Tom Roberts | Aug. 2, 2010



U.S. soldiers depart their base in Baysal, Afghanistan, to conduct a patrol June 16. (UPI/U.S. Army/William Tremblay)

It is a rare day when Pentagon leaders and peace activists are reading from the same page, but the crush of two ongoing wars and the deep recession have forged a broad and unlikely alliance arguing for significant cuts in U.S. military spending.

The most recent demonstration of the growing consensus for military cuts was the much publicized statement issued July 6 by U.S. Reps. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) and Ron Paul (R-Texas), who not only come from different sides of the aisle but from differing perspectives on most issues. On this issue, however, the two agree, calling for "substantial reductions in the projected level of American military spending as part of future deficit reduction efforts."

"For decades," they continued, making points that have long constituted the central pragmatic arguments of peace groups, "the subject of military expenditures has been glaringly absent from public debate. Yet the Pentagon budget for 2010 is \$693 billion -- more than all other discretionary spending programs combined. Even subtracting the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, military spending still amounts to over 42 percent of total spending."



In addition, wrote Frank and Paul, "American military spending makes up

approximately 44 percent of all such expenditures worldwide."

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David Robinson, executive director of Pax Christi USA, part of a worldwide Catholic peace organization, welcomes the new attention to downsizing the military. "The deficit is going to be the battleground, budget-wise, in Congress for the next 18 months, and having the wisdom to include defense spending is going to be critical," he said in a July 27 telephone interview.

Deficit reduction measures normally fall hardest "on the poor and vulnerable," he said, "and people hurting now are going to be hurt further if military spending is not folded into the deficit reduction debate. By introducing defense spending -- which I would argue is the real culprit behind deficit spending -- poor people will take less of a hit."

A trillion over 10 years

In their statement, the two members of Congress refer to the Sustainable Defense Task Force, which they convened, and a report that the task force produced outlining steps that would cut Pentagon spending by nearly a trillion dollars over a 10-year period. The group is made up of experts from think tanks and advocacy groups that span the ideological and political spectrum.

Perhaps most significant is the threat by Paul and Frank to oppose any proposal from President Obama's National Committee on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, convened to develop a strategy for reducing the federal deficit, that does not include "substantial reductions in military spending" as part of the plan.

Two members of the deficit commission have already signaled, in interviews with *The New York Times*, their intent to include military spending in their considerations. "We're going to have to take a hard look at defense if we are going to be serious about deficit reduction," said commission member Erskine B. Bowles, a chief of staff to President Bill Clinton. Sen. Judd Gregg, a Republican from New Hampshire, said "defense should be looked at" if the commission seeks cuts in discretionary spending.

Activists like Robinson are unaccustomed to being in step with the military and political establishments when the discussion turns to military spending. In this instance, however, it was none other than Secretary of Defense Robert Gates who used a May speech at the Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kan., to sound the alarm. He said the attacks of 9/11 had "opened a gusher of defense spending that nearly doubled the base budget over the last decade, not counting supplemental appropriations for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. ... Given America's difficult economic circumstances and parlous fiscal condition, military spending on things large and small can and should expect closer, harsher scrutiny. The gusher has been turned off, and will stay off for a good period of time."



Gates included in his talk a stinging and wide-ranging critique of wasteful

budgeting and procurement practices, bloated military bureaucracies, and structures that had not changed since the end of the Cold War. Too often, he said, budgets are constructed as "a straight line projection of what was

spent the year before. Very rarely is the activity ... ever fundamentally reexamined -- either in terms of quantity, type, or whether it should be conducted at all. That needs to change.?

The private sector, he said, has been forced to streamline its organizational structures, especially in the middle and upper levels, but the military ?continues to maintain a top-heavy hierarchy that more reflects 20th-century headquarters superstructure than 21st-century realities. Two decades after the end of the Cold War led to steep cuts in U.S. forces in Europe, our military still has more than 40 generals, admirals or civilian equivalents based on the continent. Yet we scold our allies over the bloat in NATO headquarters.?

He acknowledged ?the political and demographic realities we face? and said that in advocating spending cuts and efficiencies ?we have to be mindful of the iron law of bureaucracies -- that the definition of essential work expands proportionally with the seniority of the person in charge and the quantity of time and staff available -- with 50-page PowerPoint briefings being one result.?

Cuts and accountability

The report of the Sustainable Defense Task Force examines the possibilities for savings in six areas:

- Strategic forces;
- Conventional force structure;
- Procurement, research and development;
- Personnel costs;
- Reform of Department of Defense maintenance and supply systems;
- Command, support and infrastructure expenditures.

The cuts envisioned, expected to save approximately \$960 billion between 2011 and 2020, attempt to address an imbalance that has developed since the 9/11 attacks.

According to the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, the total U.S. defense budget has grown, in inflation-adjusted dollars, from \$432 billion in 2001 to \$720 billion in fiscal 2011, a real increase of approximately 67 percent.

The Sustainable Defense Task Force Report states that total annual discretionary spending (that which is not already mandated, such as Social Security, Medicaid or other entitlements) is \$583 billion above the level set in 2001. ?Overall, the rise in defense spending accounts for almost 65 percent of this increase. Non-war defense spending is responsible for 37 percent. These portions are much greater than any other category of discretionary spending,? according to the report.

The report is clear that not all task force members ?endorse all the options, but all agree they offer genuine possibilities for resource savings.? The cuts, say the task force, can be made without compromising U.S. security or the country?s ability to fight terrorism as well as foreseeable combat missions.

One of the fundamental steps involves a basic level of accountability. According to the report?s authors, the Department of Defense ?is one of only a few federal agencies that cannot pass the test of an independent auditor,? meaning the department is unable to ?accurately track its assets.? While the department has been ?under obligation to get its books in order for 20 years,? it has ?enjoyed the benefit of special dispensations and rolling deadlines.?

As a result, say the authors, no one knows how much the department is spending in such areas as counterterrorism, the defense of Europe, nuclear deterrence or other endeavors.



Some cuts are recommended based on excessive capabilities. Cutting

the number of troops in Europe and Asia, for instance, "rolling back" the growth in the Army and Marine Corps necessitated by two wars, as well as other cuts in conventional forces could save nearly \$395 billion over 10 years, according to the report.

Gates noted in a recent speech to the Navy League's annual Sea-Air-Space Exposition that U.S. capabilities far outweigh those of the rest of the world.

For instance, he said, the Navy can carry twice as many aircraft at seas as the rest of the world combined and it has 57 nuclear-powered attack and cruise missile submarines, also more than the rest of the world combined.

"In the short term," wrote Frank and Paul, "rebuilding our economy and creating jobs will remain our nation's top priority. But it is essential that we begin to address the issue of excessive military spending in order to ensure prosperity in the future. We may not agree on what to do with the estimated \$1 trillion in savings, but we do agree that nothing either of us cares deeply about will be possible if we do not begin to face this issue now."

Robinson has ready suggestions for what to do with the money. He rails against "the crony capitalism and opportunistic military spending," including an "explosion in the number of contractors" since 9/11. "We want to see spending shifted from the Pentagon to areas like jobs training and fixing massive infrastructure problems. There are so many important things such as education and health care that could be funded -- the same things that progressives have always argued for. We need to overcome this fixation with security and spending our way out of danger."

[Tom Roberts is *NCR* editor at large. His e-mail address is troberts@ncronline.org.]

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