



America at Risk

Memo

Protect America Month: Providing for the Common Defense in the 21st Century

The Heritage Foundation's Protect America Month—running from Memorial Day to Independence Day—focuses on defense spending in the 21st century. America still faces serious threats in the world and now is not the time to weaken our military through defense budget cuts.

No. 2 • June 8, 2009

Protecting the Protectors by Investing in People and Next-Generation Equipment

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The U.S. government's primary job is to provide for the common defense. The most important element to protecting vital national interests is the U.S. military, which reinforces America's diplomatic initiatives, acts to deter threats, and, when necessary, fights and wins the nation's wars.

Two components determine a strong military: the quality of its servicemembers and the equipment available to them.

More Cash for Today's Forces

For the past 36 years, America's military has operated as an all-volunteer force. As the commission responsible for recommending a volunteer force observed, forced military service through the draft was "intolerable" when compared with a volunteer system that aligned more distinctly with "our basic national values." Almost four decades later, the verdict is in: The U.S. military is the most highly trained, well-disciplined, and adaptive fighting force the world has ever seen.

But an all-volunteer system doesn't come cheap: You get what you pay for. To recruit and retain the best force possible, as well as care for their families, the military has to provide a competitive array of pay and benefits. Although those who wear our country's uniform can never be fully compensated for their service, there are better ways to pay them.

Sustaining America's all-volunteer force will require new thinking to keep military service attractive to today's skilled and highly mobile workforce. Although the conventional wisdom that those in the military earn less than civilians with comparable experience remains untrue, Congress and the Pentagon must begin to restructure military compensation to be more responsive to America's youth. This should begin with an effort to shift emphasis away from non-cash and deferred benefits—such as health care and retirement—to a package that more heavily favors cash compensation. A cash-based system that places greater freedom in the hands of the individual servicemember will strengthen recruiting and retention and continue to raise the quality of the military as a whole.

Global Military Needs Superior Equipment

A citizen who chooses to become a member of the armed forces deserves the best equipment to succeed. The contract that exists between the volunteer servicemember and the U.S. government must strike a proper balance between meeting the financial and career needs of the troops while also equipping them with what they need to fulfill their missions.

This means more than rifles, ammunition, and trucks; it also includes modern fighters, bombers, helicopters, tanks, destroyers, cruisers, and submarines. When the government asks its citizens to fight and

possibly sacrifice for their country, Congress must then equip the forces with whatever is needed to deter potential adversaries and to win on the battlefield. Commanders also gain from highly skilled troops, and those in uniform likewise benefit from government care and a reduced likelihood of battlefield casualties because of their world-class equipment.

Winning Today and Tomorrow

The range of potential missions facing today's military is vast. While winning the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan remains the central mission, regional combatant commanders must also concern themselves with responding to humanitarian disasters, protecting sea lines of communication and free trade, deterring rogue states through a credible extended deterrence posture, and hedging against the future uncertainty that accompanies the rise of powers like China and Russia.

Regrettably, the tools required to sustain all of these efforts have been placed in jeopardy. The collective decisions by Congress and both Democratic and Republican Presidents over the past 15 years have left the U.S. military using equipment that is extremely old and, in many cases, outdated. The average age of major platforms today includes:

- Air Force tactical aircraft: over 20 years old;
- Navy tactical aircraft: over 15 years old;
- Army M-113 vehicles: 18 years old;
- CH-47 Chinook helicopters: nearly 20 years old;
- *Ticonderoga*-class cruisers: nearly 20 years old;
- P-3C Orion long-range aircraft: almost 25 years old;
- B-1 Lancer bomber: over 20 years old;
- C-5 Galaxy transport aircraft: 21 years old; and
- KC-135 tankers: 44 years old.

President Barack Obama's fiscal year 2010 defense budget ensures that the military's equipment will continue to atrophy and next-generation systems will continue to be delayed. Pledging reform, Obama has proposed to defer or cancel programs that will serve critical, multi-mission roles in the coming decades. These include the

F-22 Raptor fifth-generation fighter, the Air Force's new long-range bomber and search and rescue helicopter, the Navy's next-generation cruiser, the Army's wheeled and tracked vehicles, and \$1.4 million from the Missile Defense Agency's budget.

Some uniformed observers consider platforms like the F-22 to be "Cold War" systems designed for combat in a different era. It would be fair to remind such critics that, just as the F-22 will provide the U.S. with a platform capable of maintaining air dominance over the next 30 years, the F-15 and F-16 have done so for the past 30 years. During that time—a period spanning both the Cold War and post-Cold War periods and 17 years of patrolling no-fly zones over Iraq—the aircraft were used not just in combat roles, but as forward-deployed assets that could provide extended deterrence everywhere from the American homeland, to the Balkans, Middle East, and Asia-Pacific.

How to Protect America's Protectors

Instead of discussing what the military can do without—sacrifices often paid for with life and limb—the real debate over hard choices should focus on how best to pay America's military and ensure that new enlistees retain the same military superiority possessed by today's forces. Assuming that one type of conflict is most likely over the next 20 years and then overinvesting in equipment to match that assumption is dangerous for a global power.

Simply patching up older systems is not enough: We have seen F-15s literally cracking up and falling out of the sky and the entire U.S. Navy surface fleet having to stop operations due to low readiness levels. Robust investment in next-generation systems is needed now so that the troops who sign up in 10 years can also reap the benefits of American military primacy.

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PROTECT AMERICA

The 21st century will be a dangerous place if America fails to protect itself and its allies.

This product is part of the Protect America Initiative, one of 10 transformational initiatives in our Leadership for America campaign.