



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. 6 • July 14, 2009

A Defense Budget to Recapitalize the U.S. Military with Next-Generation Platforms

The Honorable James Talent

For three years, The Heritage Foundation has been advocating the “4 percent for Freedom” solution as national defense policy. This 10-year commitment would affirm the principle that the regular defense budget, through which the government prepares and sustains the American military (not including the cost of ongoing conflicts like Afghanistan), should be at least 4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). Heritage believes that our leaders should commit to spending at least one out of every 25 dollars of America’s wealth each year on the national defense.

Ensuring a robust defense and a strong military should not be controversial. Many Americans believe the federal government already spends much more than 4 percent of GDP on the military. After all, the United States government’s first priority is supposed to be the national defense; therefore, that obligation should have the first claim on taxpayer dollars. Moreover, the government historically has spent far more on defense, as a percentage of GDP, than Heritage is now advocating as a floor. The average defense budget since World War II has been over 5 percent of GDP.

Maintaining a commitment to fund the defense budget at sufficient levels for the next five to 10 years is even more compelling now than it was when first proposed. China, for example, has opened a huge nuclear submarine base and is acquiring carrier-killer missiles. Russia invaded Georgia last December, and Iran gets

closer to nuclear status every day. North Korea is developing a longer-range missile. Meanwhile, the bipartisan Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction unanimously found last December that terrorists would have a nuclear or bioweapon within five years. Our neighbors in northern Mexico are growing closer to anarchy because of drug cartels, and the piracy threat has become a major concern.

Now is the time for Congress to restate the need for adequate funding for national defense. The current condition of the American military demands no less than a defense budget of 4 percent of GDP if the United States is to maintain the qualitative superiority of its military.

The Current Condition of America’s Military

After the Cold War ended, the Clinton Administration believed an era of peace was at hand. Consequently, it cut both the size of the military and the funding for procurement and modernization far below what was necessary to sustain American capabilities. Under President Clinton, the active duty Army was reduced to 10-division strength—a decision that virtually everyone now agrees was a mistake. Acquisition of vital equipment was reduced as well. In some cases, the Pentagon cut by 80 percent to 90 percent the number of platforms (ships, planes, and tracked vehicles) purchased, compared to what was procured on average

from 1975 to 1990. In effect, the Clinton Administration forced the military to take a procurement “holiday.”

President George W. Bush increased spending on the military, but not nearly enough to make up for the failures of the 1990s. As a result, the military’s capital inventory has become dangerously outdated. For example, in 1973, at the end of the Vietnam era, the average age of Air Force aircraft was approximately nine years. Twenty years later, the average age of the inventory was just under 15 years. Today, the average age has risen to nearly 25 years. The other services are in similar condition.

America is in danger of losing vital capabilities. Without adequate numbers of new F-22 fighter aircraft, America will not be able to maintain air superiority over the Taiwan Strait. Without a larger Navy and enhanced airlift and refueling capability, America cannot project power quickly. If the submarine fleet drops below minimum requirements, the Navy cannot gather intelligence or protect its carriers. Without vehicles and tanks that are less vulnerable and computer-linked, the Army cannot win regional conflicts decisively or conduct counterterrorism missions with minimal loss of life.

There is no question that planned modernization budgets are inadequate for the military to sustain the capabilities on which America depends. At Heritage, we have documented that the shortfall is roughly \$50 billion per year. Other experts, including those at the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), believe the shortfall is much higher. Supporting adequate and stable defense budgets is the only solution that will allow the military to upgrade and recapitalize its inventory of ships, planes, and aircraft.

An Adequate Defense Budget Is Fully Affordable

Is the 4 percent benchmark affordable? This year, in quick order, Congress has passed the TARP legislation,

which cost \$700 billion; the stimulus package, which cost \$800 billion; and the fiscal 2009 budget, which added \$1.2 trillion to the debt. Congress also approved a fiscal 2010 budget resolution that will increase the debt by another \$800 billion. The stimulus bill increased expenditures on programs like Pell Grants and Medicaid. If extended, they will add another \$3.3 trillion to the debt over the next 10 years. All told, the CBO has said that these spending measures will add \$10 trillion to the national debt over the next 10 years.

For just 5 percent of that money, the government could have recapitalized the military with the next generation of platforms that will sustain America’s technological superiority against any foreseeable threat. After the frenzy of government spending over the past few months, those who do not want to sustain the diverse capabilities of the armed services should at least be intellectually honest enough not to hide behind budgetary reasons as an excuse.

Conclusion

Support for increased defense spending is a practical position rather than an ideological one. The global leadership role that America adopted after World War II, though not without its downsides, has successfully prevented the two worst disasters that could befall the world: totalitarian domination and another general war. In the process, a great deal of good has resulted. The United States has prospered for three generations, Europe has resolved the age-old conflicts that divided it, democracies have sprung up all over the world, and billions of people who were living in despair now have the hope of freedom.

It would be the height of folly—a strategic mistake of the first order—to imperil those achievements by failing to make the modest sacrifices necessary to sustain the military power that made them possible.

—*The Honorable James Talent is Distinguished Fellow in Military Affairs at The Heritage Foundation and served as a U.S. Senator from 2002 to 2007.*



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.