



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.

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Spending Spree and Cutting Defense Don't Add Up

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During the Administration of John Adams, Americans were offered a chance to bribe their way out of a war. Most responded by chanting, “Millions for defense, not a penny for tribute.” That was then. These days, our political leaders might well go for the tribute.

Spending money is easy—when it's somebody else's money. Political leaders are busy throwing hundreds of billions at every conceivable domestic program, hoping to stimulate the economy. Much of that money, by the way, could be considered “tribute” because it is directed at big campaign donors such as teachers unions and public employees.

Meanwhile, our leaders are cutting back on defense, even in the midst of a war in Afghanistan and ongoing terrorist threats. That's a mistake, because protecting our nation is one of the few jobs specifically assigned to the federal government by the Constitution. And yet defense spending is on the chopping block.

Consider missile defense. If there was ever a system that ought to be noncontroversial, this is it. A missile defense screen destroys incoming weapons before they can kill innocent civilians but has absolutely no offensive uses. The U.S. has already deployed a handful of interceptors in Alaska and California, where they could help protect our homeland if North Korea keeps up its missile tests and grows its reach and capabilities.

Another set of defenses is scheduled to be deployed in Poland and the Czech Republic, where they would be

in place to protect against the growing Iranian threat to Europe. Think of that: American missile defense technology, working almost as a gift to our allies in Europe.

Our missile defense systems have already passed crucial tests. Last year, the Missile Defense Agency intercepted and destroyed a test-target ballistic missile. A year earlier, the U.S. missile defense system destroyed the mock warhead of a long-range missile. In fact, since the start of the Administration of George W. Bush, 37 of 46 “hit-to-kill” missile defense tests have been successful. We are amazingly adept at “hitting a bullet with a bullet.”

Strangely, however, President Barack Obama wants deep cuts in missile defense. His pending budget calls for a \$1.62 billion reduction in missile defense spending. That's roughly 15 percent less than we'll spend this year, just as the program is getting up and running.

The Administration is also pushing to trim the number of ground-based midcourse defense interceptors from 44 to 30. That makes no sense, especially with North Korea aggressively testing long-range missiles. General James Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warns that Pyongyang may be able to hit the continental United States with a missile within three years. We need all the defensive weapons we can muster to counter that threat.

Meanwhile, President Obama seems eager to rush through deep cuts in our offensive strategic nuclear

and conventional weapons systems too. During a recent summit in Russia, the President agreed to slash the number of America's operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,675 or fewer. The timing is odd, to say the least, since the Administration has not yet completed its Nuclear Posture Review, which is designed to let policymakers know which weapons—and how many of them—our country needs.

The Administration also agreed with the Russians that we would deploy fewer than 1,100 strategic weapon delivery systems. Since these systems can also deliver conventional weapons, that is almost like a double arms cut. The President seems to want to get a deal done before December, when the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) officially expires. But since neither nation is planning to build new nuclear weapons anyway, there is no need to hurry. Our nation will remain secure, with or without START.

The missile defense cuts are part of a pattern of cuts in overall defense spending. Obama has proposed that funding for the core defense budget should increase by an average of around \$10 billion each year through 2014. That may sound like a lot of money, but in fact it represents no real growth, even as spending on other programs will soar and our military is fighting a war. Obama expects the core defense budget to amount to less than 3.3 percent of GDP in 2014, a sharp reduction from today's 3.8 percent.

Meanwhile, this year's "stimulus" package alone doubled the Department of Education's budget in one swift stroke. Soon, to rephrase a bumper sticker that was popular in the 1970s, the Air Force really may need to hold a bake sale. It could use the proceeds to purchase new fighter aircraft.

The Obama Administration wants to cap production at just 187 F-22A planes and shut down the produc-

tion line that produces those planes. Meanwhile, Russia and China currently operate 12 fighter and bomber production lines. The F-22 is the most advanced fighter aircraft ever built, far superior to anything else in the air. With enough F-22s, the Air Force could maintain air dominance for decades. But without enough of them, others may rise to challenge the U.S. in the air.

"Some foreign-built fighters can now match or best the F-15 in aerial combat," noted Mark Bowden in the March issue of *The Atlantic*. "Given the changing nature of the threats our country is facing and the dizzying costs of maintaining our advantage, America is choosing to give up some of the edge we've long enjoyed, rather than pay the price to preserve it" by building enough F-22s.

For now, lawmakers should agree to buy at least 20 more F-22s to keep the production line going and bring the Air Force closer to its long-term requirements.

The United States is unique in history. Our Navy dominates the seas as no other nation has ever dreamed, yet we use that force to protect international commerce and punish pirates.

Similarly, our Army and Marine Corps boast the best-trained, most disciplined, best-equipped ground force ever deployed, yet instead of capturing and annexing valuable land, we prefer to defeat terrorists and help free people to set up democratic governments. For more than a generation, our Air Force has not flown in a sky that it didn't dominate completely.

Maintaining these advantages will require financial investments. The Administration's long-term plans would fall short. It's time to fix these misplaced priorities.

—Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D., is President of *The Heritage Foundation*.



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.