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Conservatives Should Have Done More to Increase Long-Term Defense Spending During Budget Resolution Debates

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The annual congressional budget debate is over, and the House and Senate have passed one-party budget resolutions. Once the bill emerges from conference, the defense budget for 2010 and beyond will remain inadequate. While House Republicans offered two alternate budget plans that exceeded the President's proposed spending levels for the first year, they still fell short of what the military needs by generally only matching the White House blueprint thereafter.

While the budget resolution is not signed into law, it is essentially where the fight for a higher defense topline is won or lost for the rest of the year—long before the House Armed Services Committee or Defense Appropriations Subcommittee craft their annual military spending bills. Once the spending caps are set by the budget resolution, Members can really affect only marginal change within the defense budget. Further, they must shift funds around from one program to another if they need to buy more C-17s and fewer trucks, for example.

Returning to an Era of Finite Resources and Prioritization. Along with identifying offsets and making trade-offs, prioritization is an important part of policymaking. Yet robustly defending the nation should not be a difficult choice for any legislator to make. Further, the proposal to slightly increase the defense budget by about \$27 billion in fiscal year (FY) 2010 is achievable and fiscally responsible. This spending level could hardly be considered excessive or unrealistic given that Amer-

ica has traditionally spent more than 4 percent of the national economy, or gross domestic product, on defense—in bad and good economic times.

The bottom line is clear: The military is unable to sustain today's capabilities with current funding levels. Underfunding the military in 2010 only increases inefficiencies and costs for buying equipment and weapons systems every year thereafter. For example:

- As equipment ages even further, the costs of maintenance rises;
- As multiple deployments stress an undersized force, the cost of compensation goes up; and
- As the defense industrial base shrinks, acquisition processes lose the cost benefits of competition and efficient build rates.

A slightly higher defense budget would still encourage the military to use its resources prudently without limiting the U.S. economy's capacity to grow and prosper. If Congress were to instead increase defense spending to the modest levels requested by various service chiefs, the assurance of stable funding—particularly for modernization—

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would allow the Pentagon to plan for procurement and development over the long term, thereby reducing both delays and program costs.

Modest Defense Increases Are Affordable and Necessary. Increasing the defense budget throughout the next decade will drive long-term trends instead of establishing a precise requirement for any specific year. In some years, the defense budget can and should exceed 4 percent of GDP.

Defense budget increases should not occur in a vacuum. They should be tied to fiscal policies that insist on restraining the projected growth in overall federal spending. Reductions in spending growth should be made first in non-essential programs and then among the programs that are responsible for driving the budget higher every year.

Domestic discretionary spending—and not defense—is the elephant in the room during any debate over culpability for the current spike in spending. Since 1990, domestic discretionary spending has grown nearly twice as fast as spending on defense *and* homeland security combined (62 percent versus 33 percent). Congress must examine these domestic programs first when trying to identify ways to restrain spending.

Alternative Defense Budget Proposals Are Not Enough for Defense. Senator James Inhofe (R–OK) deserves praise for offering an amendment (S.A. 865) to the Senate’s budget resolution that would increase defense spending in 2010 by \$27 billion over the current plan and even more throughout the decade. Unfortunately, this amendment did not receive a vote during the budget debate.

House conservatives came out of the gate with a solid defense topline for 2010. The House budget alternatives offered by the House Republicans and the Republican Study Committee (RSC), however, should have matched Senator Inhofe’s amendment funding levels for defense. The House Republican budget is noteworthy in its efforts to keep federal spending at just over 20 percent of GDP, which is roughly the spending level before the recession, and for addressing the \$43 trillion, 75-year unfunded liability in Social Security and Medicare.¹

If left unchecked, the Big Three entitlement programs would eventually consume all federal dollars—including those for defense. While House Republicans and the RSC deserve great credit for offering alternate spending blueprints and, by extension, an alternative vision for America’s future, their defense funding levels after 2011 are inadequate for meeting the long-term defense needs of the United States.

The House Republican budget proposed a \$5 billion increase for defense in 2010 plus an additional \$130 billion for overseas contingency operations included as part of the core defense budget. Although the RSC budget did not include a substantial increase in spending, it also contained additional \$130 billion for overseas contingency operations. Therefore, in FY 2010 both conservative House budgets leave the option open to appropriately fund the core defense budget.

The RSC and House Republican budgets include an additional \$50 billion each year from FY 2011 through 2019 for overseas contingency operations. Given that the U.S. Air Force alone has an annual modernization shortfall of \$20 billion, additional funding at these levels for “unmet Department of Defense needs” would certainly help meet the defense requirements for the next decade. Although the House alternate budgets continue to adequately fund the core defense budget through FY 2011, they fall short in FY 2012–2014 by roughly \$147 billion. However, for the combined FY 2010–2014 budget period, the alternative budgets are only \$31 billion short of the 4 percent spending benchmark.

Congress Should Go on Record Regarding Higher Defense Budgets. During the 1990s procurement holiday, Republicans acquiesced to President Clinton’s defense budget cuts, and together the two sides allowed the military to significantly decline. The irony of the last 15 years of underfunding is that these cuts were intended to “save” money. Instead, they actually caused the American taxpayer to spend billions more than necessary to sustain a military that is smaller than needed using equipment that is increasingly dated.

1. Brian M. Riedl, “House Republican Budget Would Confront Hard Choices and Rein in Budget Deficits,” Heritage Foundation *Web Memo* No. 2377, April 1, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Budget/wm2377.cfm>.

The effects of the collective decisions of the last 15 years are shown through the age of the military's equipment and subsequent strain on the force. The average age of major platforms today include:

- Air Force tactical aircraft: over 20 years old;
- Navy tactical aircraft: over 15 years old;
- Army's M-113 vehicle: 18 years old;
- CH-47 Chinook helicopter: 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 tanker: 44 years old.

Congress should not replay the 1990s defense budget cuts in search of a peace dividend that simply does not exist. Rather, Members of Congress should seek opportunities to take bold stands through roll call votes on the need to increase the defense budget. The military's modernization needs are urgent and cannot be delayed any longer. A flat—or, worse, a declining—defense budget will come at the expense of modernization and the critical upgrade of next-generation equipment, which the military needed *yesterday*.

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