



America at Risk

Memo

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

The Heritage Foundation's Protect America Month is a month-long campaign focusing on the need for increased 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. AR 10-01 • May 3, 2010

Defending Freedom Is a Choice

Kim R. Holmes, Ph.D.

Talk of America's decline is in the air. It is on the cover of magazines, proclaiming, as British historian Niall Ferguson did in a recent *Foreign Affairs* piece, "Decline and Fall: When the American Empire Goes, It Is Likely to Go Quickly." Indeed, it is a topic so much in vogue that conservatives like Charles Krauthammer go to great lengths to explain that, if there were a decline of America on the world stage, it would be by choice, not because of inevitability.

American Presidents typically have used the bully pulpit to push back on such talk. They've generally spent political capital to explain to allies and enemies alike that America has no plans to give up its role as champion of freedom—the idea on which it was founded and that has invigorated generations of Americans. Defending freedom has been our choice, and no other nation in history has given so many lives and resources to defend the freedom of others.

Yet it sounds as though President Barack Obama has a different understanding of America's purpose and greatness. He said he believes in American exceptionalism in the same way "the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." In other words, no nation is truly exceptional. In addressing the United Nations, he also said: "No one nation can or should try to dominate another nation."

Whether he believes that or simply was trying to make friends, his statement turns the Reagan Doctrine of "peace through strength" on its head. Countries can and will try to dominate others, but largely because of

U.S. military might, no hostile powers have come to dominate Europe or other regions since World War II.

Alarmingly, Obama's ideas about America's future are filtering down his chain of command. A recent seminar for senior military officers at National Defense University, our nation's premier university for educating officers, was titled "Surviving Defeat" and focused on how to "refine our grand strategy" to deal "effectively with failure."

Decline is a choice. It will come about only when most Americans decide that what is unique about their country—its Constitution and its legacy of liberty—is no longer worth fighting for.

Government officials are not the only ones worried about America's decline. Recently, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Harvey Sapolsky wrote in *National Defense Magazine* that "the threat that is the most likely to hobble U.S. military capabilities" is health care, not a foreign power. In other words, exploding spending on entitlements including health care threatens our security more than, say, terrorists because it will crowd out defense spending.

As dire as this situation is, it is not irreversible. Decline is a choice. It will come about only when most Americans decide that what is unique about their country—its Constitution and its legacy of liberty—is no longer worth fighting for.



Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE • Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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The Downside of Spending So Much on Entitlements

Social spending in the United States is ballooning. Already federal, state, and local governments consume about 41 percent of all that Americans produce in goods and services (our gross domestic product, or GDP),¹ and their appetites are growing.

Heritage experts estimate that our unfunded obligations for Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and interest on the debt will reach \$63.3 trillion over the next 75 years—or \$200,000 for every man, woman, and child in America.² That is almost five times our national debt.³ The new health care law could add trillions more in liabilities to the government's balance sheet.

We are headed down a European path. Government spending in most European Union countries, which have not paid for all of their own defenses since the U.S. allied with them in NATO, is about 51 percent of GDP.⁴ Primarily, it is dedicated to health care and social programs. France spends over 20 percent of GDP on “social protection” and less than 2 percent on defense.⁵ By contrast, the U.S. has traditionally spent less than 8 percent of GDP on social programs and more than 4 percent on defense.⁶

The rate of growth in U.S. public spending accelerated dramatically in the past two years, largely due to the financial bailouts and stimulus package, but also because of permanent expansions in government programs.⁷ The Congressional Budget Office reports that

federal spending could reach about 65 percent of GDP by 2080 if current trends continue.⁸ We would have to dedicate all tax revenues to our entitlements in just 42 years,⁹ with nothing left over for defense. Because the effects of the spending trends are alarming, Representatives Jeb Hensarling (R–TX) and Mike Pence (R–IN) have introduced a constitutional amendment to limit federal spending to less than 20 percent of GDP, the historical average.

Dismantling Defense

National defense is the first obligation of the federal government. If we cannot demonstrate a commitment to keeping our forces second to none, we will do more than discourage our allies and friends. We will encourage hostile actions from our adversaries. It is not a scenario Americans should want to see.

According to the President's budget, defense spending over the next few years will continue to fall relative to the economy, from 4.9 percent to 3.6 percent of GDP by 2015.¹⁰ Indeed, defense was the target of roughly half of the Administration's \$17 billion in spending cuts in 2010. Some 50 defense programs were truncated or eliminated,¹¹ compromising not only our future air and naval superiority, but also our defense against ballistic missiles.

Consider the ramifications. With a weakened U.S. military footprint, Iran could move to establish hegemony in the oil-rich Middle East, restricting trade through the Strait of Hormuz or, worse, holding the U.S. hostage to its nuclear threats so we could not defend our interests or our friends and allies in the region. The consequences for our economy and security would be high. Were our air power and expeditionary forces to grow so weak that they are unable to take out terrorist bases overseas, the terrorists would establish

1. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Economic Outlook 86 Database*, at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/5/51/2483816.xls> (April 22, 2010).

2. Alison Fraser, “The Real Debt Washington Doesn't Want You to Know About,” *The Foundry*, March 12, 2010.

3. *Ibid.* Today, the U.S. debt stands at \$12.9 trillion. See U.S. Department of the Treasury, at <http://www.treasurydirect.gov/NP/BPDLogin?application=np> (April 22, 2010).

4. OECD, *Economic Outlook 86 Database*.

5. Heritage calculations based on statistics from OECD, *Stat Extracts*, Table 11, “Government Expenditures by Function,” at http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=SNA_TABLE11 (April 22, 2010).

6. *Ibid.*

7. The Heritage Foundation, “Recent Spending Hikes Are Not Limited to Temporary Emergencies,” Chart 3, *2010 Budget Chart Book*, at <http://www.heritage.org/budgetchartbook/federal-spending-hikes-not-temporary>.

8. U.S. Congressional Budget Office, “The Long Term Budget Outlook,” June 2009, p. 6.

9. The Heritage Foundation, “Without Entitlement Reform, Federal Spending Could Consume More than Two-Fifths of GDP by 2055,” Chart 34, *2010 Budget Chart Book*.

10. Baker Spring, “The 2011 Defense Budget: Inadequate and Full of Inconsistencies,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2375, February 22, 2010, at http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2010/pdf/bg2375.pdf.

11. John T. Bennett, “DoD Examining F/A-18 Multiyear Plans; Gates Endorses KC-X Requirements,” *Defense News*, March 24, 2010, at <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4553123>.

more safe havens from which to organize waves of attacks on Americans.

There is no escaping history. America became a world power to protect our freedoms, which are deeply tied to the security and freedom of countries around the world. We learned this terrible lesson after two world wars. Our leaders may have to learn it again unless they make the hard choices to ensure that there is no decline of American power or presence in the world.

Preserving American Exceptionalism

America the “indispensable” nation depends on America the “exceptional” nation. Freedom and prosperity at home and abroad depend on America’s continued projection of power around the world. But that will depend on our commitment to national defense, which is the first obligation of the federal government listed in the U.S. Constitution.

We have been here before. We have seen darker days, from the American Revolution to the Civil War and the two world wars. Each time, the American people have risen to defend their country and their liberties. Each

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time, they have gone to the edge of the abyss, peered inside, and then summoned the will to jump over to the other side. Each time, we have emerged from the crisis stronger than before. And every time, it has been because Americans decided they did not want to fail. They chose not to be defeated. They refused to give up.

We may well be at that moment again. After Jimmy Carter, we elected Ronald Reagan. He restored not only our belief in America, but our commitment to defense. Conservative principles and traditional American values prevailed then. They can prevail again.

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AMERICAN LEADERSHIP

The freedom and security of Americans depend on America’s global leadership.

This product is part of the Protect America and American Leadership Initiatives, two of 10 transformational initiatives in our Leadership for America campaign.

PROTECT AMERICA

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

