



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.

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The Constitutional Charge to Defend America

The Honorable Ernest Istook

National defense receives unique and elevated emphasis under the Constitution. It is not “just” another duty of the federal government. Most government spending goes to purposes not mentioned in the Constitution, but defense receives not only explicit constitutional mentions but also more emphasis than any other purpose of government.

A proper debate about the size of the federal government should take into account the U.S. military's unique and well-deserved emphasis within the Constitution. Yet defense needs are being subjugated to other spending that lacks an explicit foundation in the Constitution.

What the Constitution Says

Public understanding of accountability for America's defense often revolves around media focus on the President's role as commander in chief. But although the President's role is clearly described, his military obligation is far less than the detailed role that the Constitution grants to Congress to fund and oversee national defense, set forth in more expansive and more explicit terms.

The President's entire defense role is confined to Article 2, Section 2:

The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States.

But Article I, Section 8 enumerates the powers of Congress in 17 separate clauses. Six of these pertain to national defense. These include raising and supporting armies and a navy, making the rules that govern the armed forces, and organizing, arming, and disciplining the state-level militia as well as the army and navy.

Unfortunately, current budget discussions are lopsided when they place military spending on the same priority level—or worse—as other spending. It is the height of irony that social spending is considered “mandatory” whereas defense spending is considered “discretionary.”

As documented in The Heritage Foundation's *2011 Budget Chart Book*, even eliminating all defense spending would not solve the federal spending crisis.¹ Since 1976, annual entitlement spending has exceeded defense spending, even with the cost of wars such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Because entitlement spending has tripled while defense spending declined as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), entitlement spending (Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security) is now 10 percent of GDP, whereas defense spending is only 5 percent.²

Defense spending is now 20.1 percent of federal outlays.³ Yet some, such as President Obama, want the brunt of spending cutbacks to come from the military. Obama's revised (but not detailed) plan for fiscal year (FY) 2012 calls for \$400 billion in defense cuts over the next 10 years, mostly by canceling or delaying over 50 major weapons programs.

Budget Should Fit Needs

Rather than arbitrary cuts in the nation's readiness, a proper course is to demand greater efficiencies in the defense budget but use those savings to apply toward other urgent military priorities. The Heritage Foundation has documented how this approach could undo the damage of recent downsizings of America's army, navy, and aerial fleet that have occurred even as China and others have been beefing up their militaries.⁴ The Pentagon is already telling Congress that the U.S. is not prepared for China's aggressive buildup.⁵

The alternative is to acquiesce in the decline of America as the world's greatest power. As the Associated Press recently reported:

Defense spending is about to enter a steep decline that may force the Pentagon to abandon some military missions, shrink the armed forces and perhaps limit America's role in the world, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said.... [Gates] said he has already reduced or eliminated spending in the most obvious areas. "The 'low-hanging fruit'—those weapons and other programs considered most questionable—have not only been plucked, they have been stomped and crushed," he said.⁶

Policymakers should avoid the temptation to design America's national security to meet an arbitrary budget and instead find the budget to meet its security needs. This process is known as defining the requisite "force structure," which is done every four years by the Pentagon in its Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). The most recent version was compiled in 2010 but was tainted by an effort to align it with the Obama Administration's philosophy more than with military security needs.⁷

Finding that the QDR therefore was "inadequate to protect vital U.S. national interests," The Heritage Foundation commissioned its own bottom-up look at the U.S. military and presented a highly detailed report of the manpower, ships, planes, logistics, and equipment that are needed.⁸ The conclusion is that funding the core defense program would cost an average of approximately \$720 billion per year for the five-year period from FY 2012 to FY 2016. This covers not only traditional military but also force structure to address cyberwarfare and terrorist threats.

The threat is not that the federal government will spend too much on defense but too little on defense while too much on everything else. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen has warned that the budget deficit is the number one national security threat to the United States.⁹

1. "Even Eliminating Vital Defense Spending Completely Would Not Solve the Entitlement Spending Problem," Heritage Foundation *2011 Budget Chart Book*, at <http://www.heritage.org/budgetchartbook/defense-spending-entitlement-spending-problem>.
2. "Defense Spending Has Declined While Entitlement Spending Has Increased," Heritage Foundation *2011 Budget Chart Book*, at <http://www.heritage.org/budgetchartbook/defense-entitlement-spending>.
3. U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2012*, March 2011, at http://comptroller.defense.gov/defbudget/fy2012/FY12_Green_Book.pdf (May 27, 2011).
4. Mackenzie Eaglen and Julia Pollack, "How to Save Money, Reform Processes, and Increase Efficiency in the Defense Department," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2507, January 10, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/01/How-to-Save-Money-Reform-Processes-and-Increase-Efficiency-in-the-Defense-Department>.
5. Bill Gertz, "Jet Delay Adds to China Threat," *Washington Times*, May 27, 2011, at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/may/25/inside-the-ring-377211977/> (May 27, 2011).
6. Robert Burns, "Gates Says Defense Cuts Will Mean Smaller Military," *BusinessWeek.com*, May 24, 2011, at <http://www.businessweek.com/ap/financialnews/D9NDVBEO2.htm> (May 27, 2011).
7. Mackenzie Eaglen, "The Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review: Simply an Extension of the President's 2010 Defense Budget Plans," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2788, February 2, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/02/the-pentagons-quadrennial-defense-review-simply-an-extension-of-the-presidents>.
8. "A Strong National Defense: The Armed Forces America Needs and What They Will Cost," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 90, April 5, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/04/a-strong-national-defense-the-armed-forces-america-needs-and-what-they-will-cost>.
9. Malik Ahmad Jalal, "The Number One National Security Threat?," *Harvard National Security Journal*, March 28, 2011, at <http://harvardnsj.com/2011/03/the-number-one-national-security-threat/> (May 27, 2011).

The First Priority

America's priorities should be ordered as directed by the Constitution: to provide specifically for the common defense and then generally for the nation's welfare.

As has been well stated by Heritage's Mackenzie Eaglen:

The rights enshrined in our Constitution are only safe in practice when that constitutional order is

defended by adequate power. It is the federal government's responsibility to maintain that power and to bring it to bear against nations or enemies that threaten America's security or interests and therefore its freedoms.¹⁰

—**The Honorable Ernest Istook** was a U.S. Congressman for 14 years and served on the National Defense Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee.

10. Mackenzie Eaglen, "Why Provide for the Common Defense?" Heritage Foundation *Understanding America Report*, January 19, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/01/why-provide-for-the-common-defense>.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/ar1105>



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.