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America's Choice in a Dangerous Age: Lead or Follow

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Abstract: *America has a choice: Keep leading or start following. Despite presidential leadership on the operation that eliminated Osama bin Laden, the logic of White House defense decisions is baffling: Expand our military commitments while cutting funding for our armed forces. This is a recipe for disaster and decline. President Obama's plan to cut \$400 billion from the defense budget over the next decade will not dent the deficit nor address the real federal money pit: entitlements. But the Pentagon and the troops will lose capabilities, and their ranks will be thinned. It is time to get serious about oversight and reform, to work the defense budget with a scalpel instead of a sword, securing the blessings of liberty for our children and grandchildren.*

Thank you to Heritage for what you all are doing for defense and for holding this series. I don't think there's a better way to open your Protect America Month than by offering heartfelt congratulations and gratitude to the team that eliminated Osama bin Laden. To fly deep into Pakistani territory and successfully attack an entrenched enemy on his home turf—well, that's not an easy thing to do. Their professionalism and courage brings great credit on themselves and the United States of America.

You know, Ronald Reagan was a big fan of telling Soviet jokes, so in that spirit, I'd like to honor President Reagan and give our British allies a pat on the back at the same time. From what I understand, this is a true story.

Talking Points

- If unpredictability is a threat, America lives in dangerous times. New powers like China are rising; old powers like Russia are rejuvenating. Our two oceans are no longer sufficient to protect us. New avenues of commerce and communication allow determined adversaries to bypass our defenses. The spread of nuclear and ballistic missile technology allows small regimes to do great harm to our Republic.
- In such an international climate, expanding America's military commitments while cutting funding for our armed forces is a recipe for disaster and decline.
- In a \$530 billion defense budget, there has to be room for some savings, but any savings that are identified by the Defense Department must go back into defense: *not* to health care, *not* to Social Security, *not* to cowboy poetry, and *not* to any other pet project.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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During the Cold War, the Soviets treated the Black Sea as their private territorial waters. So naturally, the British—who saw the *world* as their territorial waters—sent a squadron of destroyers into the Black Sea on patrol. A Russian commander detected them and harshly radioed, “Tell us what you doing in the Black Sea!”

The British Commodore replied, “About 20 knots.”

In the spirit of that military brevity, I’d like to borrow an old Army phrase and give you the bottom line up front. The world is in a time of momentous upheaval. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, American dominance is being challenged by credible actors.

Whether or not we are in a period of decline is to be determined, but I agree with Adlai Stevenson’s wisdom, at least on this: “If America stumbles, the world could fall.”

The Choice Before Us: Lead or Follow

One thing is for certain: If we stumble, it will be because we choose to fall. We have a choice. We can keep leading or we can start following. But leading from behind is not a practical foreign policy.

I commend the President for his leadership on the bin Laden operation, but his leadership in other key areas has been scarce. It’s my sense that White House defense decisions are putting this great Republic on the fast track for decline. The logic has been simply baffling to me: Expand our military commitments while cutting funding for our armed forces.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is a recipe for disaster and decline.

Mr. Obama has been called the post-American President. During his tenure, American exceptionalism has been called into question. Our role as a stabilizing, unifying force in the world has been doubted. We have flinched from positions of responsibility as the global order trembles with the forces of hope and change. And I use that term not in the rapid, sloganeering style of political campaigns, but as it exists on the tongues and in the hearts of the oppressed. Today the peoples of the Middle East are standing up in defiance of tyranny, filled with hope that their nations can change.

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Since our founding, America has been the beacon of light for these movements; our military, the torchbearer. New England Minutemen defied a monarch. Union soldiers freed the enslaved South. GIs liberated Europe from a fascist tyrant and kept watch over Western European democracies while staring down the Soviet Empire.

The Familiar Battleground

We are once again in a time where democracy squares off against tyranny. The battleground is all too familiar to us—the Middle East. With our military engaged in three different theaters of combat in this perilous region, it is monumentally important that our nation remains guarded and strong. It must be our top priority to field the forces and the hardware necessary to stave off even the most unlikely of contingencies.

The “Arab Spring” is fraught with both prize and peril. Potential for chaos is high and the danger to our nation real. Yet during this unpredictable upheaval, this momentous shift in the global order, the President announced one of the largest cuts to our armed forces in history.

Let’s take a look at another historical lesson. This year we honored the 20th anniversary of the Gulf War. A contingency in the Middle East that few had anticipated blossomed into a multinational effort to protect an innocent population from a brutal dictator—some of this might sound familiar.

At the time, Saddam Hussein had the fourth largest army in the world. His troops were salty veterans of an eight-year conflict with Iran and equipped with the latest Soviet-made weapons. Saddam had promised the “Mother of All Battles.” One hundred hours after meeting American and allied ground forces in combat, the Iraqi army was, in the words of then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, in the “Mother of All Retreats.”

The stunning coalition victory in the Gulf War was no accident. It was a result of the courage and cunning of our troops; leadership that believed in

a strong American role in international affairs; and fighting forces that went into combat with the best equipment, the best training, and the best leadership in the world.

Consider the lesson here. Throughout the '80s, our end strength was built around a threat that never materialized, but when trouble popped up unexpectedly, our forces were strong and well equipped. We shipped half a million troops to the Persian Gulf in a matter of a few short months, all while keeping our gloves up in Western Europe. Victory was swift and absolute.

Facing the Unpredictability of Warfare

I liken this to Ronald Reagan's famous "bear in the woods" campaign ad. In it, a menacing bear is portrayed as unpredictable, and therefore dangerous. The point—and it is a relevant one even today—is that the unpredictability of warfare means our Republic must be vigilant and it must be strong.

If unpredictability is a threat, we live in dangerous times. Technology has empowered individual actors to commit horrific acts of violence; we saw that on September 11. New powers like China are rising; old powers like Russia are rejuvenating. Our two oceans are no longer sufficient to protect us. New avenues of commerce and communication like space and cyberspace allow determined adversaries to bypass our defenses. The spread of nuclear and ballistic missile technology allows small regimes, previously never a threat to our way of life, to do great harm to our Republic.

It is monumentally important that our nation remains guarded and strong. It must be our top priority to field the forces and the hardware necessary to stave off even the most unlikely of contingencies.

Not only has our traditional means of defending ourselves been tossed out the window, but the very nature of waging war has evolved so rapidly that there is no way of anticipating how the next major conflict will look. When making your New Year's resolutions, how many of you anticipated the Tunisian government falling? Or the Egyptian? Who

predicted there would be a no-fly zone over Libya? Who anticipated innocent Syrians being gunned down in the street?

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I fear we are walking into the future blindly, ignoring the lessons of our past.

As commander in chief, President Obama should share my concern about staving off American decline. If he does, it is not reflected in his policies. As we prosecute three tough wars in the Middle East and humanitarian relief in Japan, as we rely on weapon systems long past their prime, as we learn about new threats to our daily life, President Obama has announced plans to shrink our military that can only be described as historic.

- Twenty major weapon systems have been cut since he took office.
- More are on the chopping block.
- We anticipate losing thousands of soldiers and Marines—that one really concerns me.
- The Navy's fleet is almost half of what it was just 20 years ago.
- The Air Force is flying airplanes with an average age of 30 years.

With equipment that is falling apart and a war entering its tenth year, the strain on the troops—our most precious resource—can only be described as severe.

Today's military is composed of young men and women who willingly answered their nation's call. They were not coerced into combat. They heard the trumpet's blast, and they answered.

Your average soldiers are more likely to possess a high school diploma or some level of college education than their civilian counterparts are. They are more likely to come from America's middle class. They volunteered knowing that America was at war. Though these fighting men and women have much to lose, they are willing to risk all for their family, their faith, their friends, and, yes, their flag.

The Toll of a Decade of Conflict

But a decade's worth of conflict has taken its toll. During the Cold War, an American soldier was expected to hold the line against the Soviet Union. That was it. Today, their missions have multiplied.

Some of our officers and NCOs, both men and women, have deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan five times in the past decade. An ideal deployment cycle dictates that for every year we ask a soldier to fight in the Middle East, they spend two years with their families. Unfortunately, we are still trying to hold our end of that bargain.

To ask our military to accomplish their tasks with antiquated equipment, with weapons left over from the Cold War, while separated from their families every other year is simply disgraceful.

I find it disturbing that as combat stress takes its toll on the force, the Obama Administration has announced plans to cut troop end-strength in numbers that must be counted in brigades.

I supported President Obama's surge into Afghanistan and I continue to support his strategy. I refuse to vote for any legislation, however, that will increase the stresses on our overtasked and overdeployed fighting forces. If the President expands the military's missions, he must expand their funding as well. These amazing men and women deserve no less than our full support.

Aside from the wars, our military is expected to faithfully discharge a number of new, demanding duties. We ask that they guard the seas, protect our computers from hackers and viruses, aid in humanitarian relief across the globe, protect our assets in space, and deter aggression from rising powers. To ask them to accomplish these tasks with antiquated equipment, with weapons left over from the Cold War, while separated from their families every other year is simply disgraceful.

A young Army cook wryly noted that a "well-fed soldier is a happy soldier." I believe that wisdom applies elsewhere. A well-equipped soldier who knows his family at home is taken care of is a happy

soldier, and I will continue to fight to ensure our troops carry out their duties with their rucksacks full and spirits high. I will fight cuts to thin their ranks when we need them more than ever. And I will fight any effort by the President to unnecessarily increase the burden on our brave servicemen and women.

A Way Forward

My remarks are not intended to be all gloom and doom. There is a way forward here, a way to be responsible stewards of the taxpayers' dollars without hollowing out the force.

Cutting military items wholesale, given the challenges I've laid out, is irresponsible and dangerous, but let's be honest: In a \$530 billion defense budget, there has to be room for some savings. The Pentagon is going to need to do some housecleaning. That's just the fiscal reality that we're facing. *But* any savings that are identified by the Defense Department must go back into defense: *not* to health care, *not* to Social Security, *not* to cowboy poetry—and that's a real one, by the way—and *not* to any other pet project the Obama Administration deems a higher priority than our security.

I want to thank The Heritage Foundation for leading the charge on identifying efficiencies without compromising our security. You provide a valuable and credible voice to a debate that requires reasoned, strategic thinking.

This is the heart of our approach to this year's National Defense Authorization Act. To avoid the hazards of the President's plan to cut \$400 billion from defense over the next decade, we are crafting a smart piece of legislation that focuses on spending taxpayer money wisely without sacrificing military capabilities. I'll give you just a few examples.

Ballistic Missile Defense. The first is an issue near and dear to The Heritage Foundation's heart: ballistic missile defense. Missile defense is an important part of homeland defense, so we must get it right, but getting it right means spending our dollars wisely.

The President's budget request calls for \$800 million over the next two years to fund MEADS, a joint American and European missile defense pro-

gram that has had a poor record of performance and will never be deployed. I understand Heritage has been a proponent of this joint effort, but the program is broken. Here we need to harvest what

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benefits and savings we can and then redirect these scarce resources to more urgent priorities, including the Ground Based Midcourse Defense deployed in Alaska and Hawaii—the only protection we have to defend our homeland against long-range missile attack.

Armored Fighting Vehicles. The Defense Department has plans to *temporarily* halt the production lines of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle and the Abrams Tank. Friends, the defense industry cannot be turned on and off like a light switch. Shutting down production and then restarting at a later date costs more than just keeping the lines open!

This is a no-brainer. With ground forces heavily deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan and the threat of IEDs still very real, *increasing* cost to *decrease* our fleet of armored fighting vehicles is foolishness. We plan to fund both these production lines in fiscal year 2012. This will spare the Pentagon expensive shutdown and startup costs, keep a robust labor force working, and provide our troops with modernized armored fighting vehicles.

You know, there's a great story from World War II on what our acquisition strategy should be. General George Marshall was approached by an aide who had found a new vehicle the Army was thinking about buying. The aide said it was sturdy and fast. General Marshall asked a few more questions and then said, "OK, do it." That's a little different from the way we do things now.

That vehicle was the Jeep, and the Army built more than 640,000 of them. We still see them around.

Next Generation Bomber. We have another important acquisition program coming up: the Next Generation Bomber. I'm proud of how both the Air

Force and my committee are approaching the development. First, the new bomber will replace both the B-1 and the B-2, and probably the B-52, so that it can be procured in sufficient numbers to meet our strategic needs. Second, it focuses on the *integration* instead of *invention* of new technologies. Most of this is classified, but I can tell you that we're building a sturdy, capable platform that will do one thing very well: penetrate enemy air defenses to deliver a lethal payload.

We'll continue to upgrade the bomber to fit new missions and new strategic needs, but those upgrades will happen over time to help alleviate the cost to the taxpayer.

Joint Strike Fighter. Finally, there's the General Electric engine for the Joint Strike Fighter. I don't want to bore you with the details of engine acquisition strategy for fifth generation fighter jets, so here's the bird's-eye view. We are building upwards of 2,000 Joint Strike Fighters. Engine costs eat up almost a quarter of the overall airplane buy. To help soften those costs, the Pentagon originally planned to have two engines, built by a GE-Rolls-Royce team and a Pratt & Whitney team that would constantly compete for new production and sustainment contracts. History has demonstrated that these competitions enhance performance and reduce cost. With our future air superiority depending on the Joint Strike Fighter program, that struck me as smart planning.

Unfortunately, the Pentagon recently decided that a "second engine" is wasteful and canceled the program. The original engine, built by Pratt, is already fraught with cost overruns. The GE engine is 80 percent complete and already performing well. If finished, it could drive down the overall Joint Strike Fighter price tag by billions of dollars. That is significant.

I'm curious how protecting a monopoly for a program that will span decades and cost \$400 billion is in the best interest of the taxpayer. It sounds like the classic "penny wise, pound foolish" purchasing strategy that has hounded the Pentagon for years.

GE and Rolls-Royce are aware of the current stresses on the defense budget and the taxpayer. I'm pleased to announce that instead of being part of

the problem, they have decided to be part of the solution. Instead of lobbying for the final 20 percent needed to finish the engine, the GE team has committed to funding the engine for fiscal year 2012 on their own dime.

History has demonstrated that competition for contracts enhances performance and reduces cost.

I will accept and support their approach. They believe in their engine, and they believe in competition. Thanks to their willingness to compromise, we'll break up a monopoly and potentially harvest billions in savings while fielding a more capable, more robust fighter jet—all at zero cost to the taxpayer.

That sort of acquisition reform from the defense industry should be rewarded and applauded at every opportunity, and I thank GE and Rolls-Royce for coming to us with a smart, viable solution to a tough problem.

Choosing the Right Path

With the future of U.S. security on the line, there are two paths we can take. We can adopt President Obama's plan and cut \$400 billion from the defense budget. This won't dent the deficit and doesn't address the real federal money pit: entitlements. But it will hit the Pentagon and the troops hard. They will lose certain capabilities, and their ranks will be thinned.

Secretary Gates recently said, after trimming \$78 billion earlier this year, that we were approaching the minimum level of defense spending needed to maintain our global commitments. We are pro-

jected to fall below that figure by an average of 7 percent each year for the next 12 years. That's the Obama plan.

Or we can roll up our sleeves and get serious about oversight and reform. We can work the defense budget with a scalpel instead of a sword, securing the blessings of liberty for our children and our grandchildren.

If, God forbid, America does stumble, if we do lose our way, historians will ask for generations: Was America pushed, or did America fall? My challenge to you is to ensure that question never has to be asked...and never has to be answered.

The Heritage Foundation has sounded the trumpet's blast on smarter defense spending. Continue your good work. Continue to offer your sage advice to Congress. Let's work together to ensure that President Reagan's "shining city on the hill" burns bright for future generations.

Twenty years ago, our nation liberated Kuwait and won the Cold War. America appeared invulnerable, and tyrants trembled. A decade's worth of peace followed.

Let us stand up and be strong again. Let us meet the security challenges of the 21st century with the determination and resolve that has littered our history with the remains of despots and dictators. Let this Republic stand tall once more to protect our liberty, to preserve our prosperity, and to pledge to the world that America will always lead so that America will always be free.

—*The Honorable Howard "Buck" McKeon (R-CA)*
is a Member of the United States House of Representatives and Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.