

LECTURE

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Why Conservatives Should Fund and Support a Strong National Defense

The Honorable Jon Kyl

Abstract

As Senator Jesse Helms wrote in his memoir, “Jefferson warned us that ‘the price of liberty is eternal vigilance.’ ... [T]he lesson of history is that to secure our liberty, America must be constantly on guard, preparing to defend our nation against tomorrow’s adversaries even as we vanquish the enemies of today.” Vigilance must be reinforced by the ability to act. Today, America’s ability to provide for the common defense is threatened by successive rounds of defense cuts. While our fiscal problems demand government restraint, they will not be solved by gutting our forces. Senator Jon Kyl launches The Heritage Foundation’s Protect America Month and explains why the federal government’s constitutional obligation to provide for the common defense must remain a bedrock principle of American governance.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/h1205>

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KIM R. HOLMES, PhD: It is my great pleasure to welcome you to Heritage for the third annual Jesse Helms Lecture. We’re grateful to the Helms Foundation for sponsoring this event and partnering with us on this series. Its purpose is to highlight America’s founding principles, which Senator Helms promoted with vigor.

In the inaugural Helms Lecture, Ambassador John Bolton gave a rousing defense of national sovereignty. In the second Lecture last year, Senator Mike Lee of Utah cogently explained why the U.S. should *still* not ratify the Law of the Sea Treaty. These issues were important to Senator Helms. As chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he often “stood in the gap” to protect our rights and our Constitution.

He also cared deeply about today’s topic: “Why Conservatives Should Fund and Support a Strong National Defense.” Senator Helms understood that government’s first responsibility is protecting America and its interests. He wrote in his memoir: “The lesson of history is that, to secure our liberty, Americans must be constantly on guard, preparing to defend our nation against tomorrow’s adversaries even as we vanquish the enemies of today.”

TALKING POINTS

- There is a creeping sentiment among some conservatives that America is in decline, mostly due to runaway spending, and that we therefore cannot afford the kind of military that we had in the past and should disengage from many areas of the world.
- They are right about the spending problem but wrong about the solution: If defense spending is not the problem, cutting it cannot be the solution.
- All conservatives agree that entitlement spending is out of control and must be reined in, but instead of pressing harder to achieve entitlement reform, some conservatives are willing to allow more defense cuts and allow taxes to be raised.
- What should never be in disagreement is the federal government’s constitutional obligation to secure the defense of the country even when it requires significant sacrifice.

No one in Washington knows this lesson better than our speaker today, Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona. Few work as hard as he does to protect America from those who wish her harm. And fewer still speak out as strongly about what our armed forces need to do what we ask of them.

Jon Kyl has been on America's watch since he was elected to Congress in 1987. After serving eight years in the House of Representatives, including on the Armed Services Committee, he was elected to the Senate. Now in his third and, sadly, final term there, he serves as Minority Whip and sits on its Finance and Judiciary Committees.

Time magazine called him one of the World's 100 Most Influential People in 2010, and one of the 10 best Senators in 2006. We couldn't agree more. For national security conservatives, he is a real hero. He is a strong proponent of homeland security and missile defenses. He has helped craft important counterterrorism laws. And he is leading the charge against efforts to shortchange defense to pay for social programs. As he constantly reminds his colleagues, *defense* is not the cause of our current budget problems, and cutting it won't be the solution.

My colleagues and I can't thank Senator Kyl enough for his many years of principled leadership. America needs strong voices like his to carry on Senator Helms's legacy—and we hope he's already grooming his successor for that role. It is an honor to have Senator Kyl with us today, during Protect America Month at Heritage, to deliver the 2012 Jesse Helms Lecture.

Ladies and Gentlemen, please join me in welcoming our good friend and patriot, Senator Jon Kyl.

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THE HONORABLE JON KYL:
It's an honor to be delivering the Jesse Helms Lecture.

As I'm sure many of you are aware, the Helms Lecture series occurs under the auspices of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom here at The Heritage Foundation. I do not need to remind you of Maggie Thatcher's richly deserved place in the history books that was cemented, in part, by her ardent support for strong defense—not just rhetorical support, but backed with appropriate action when necessary to protect British interests, even in faraway places.

I AM PROFOUNDLY CONCERNED THAT SUPPORT FOR ENSURING AMERICA'S PREEMINENT POSITION IS WANING, PREDICTABLY ON THE POLITICAL LEFT BUT ALSO, UNFORTUNATELY, ON THE POLITICAL RIGHT.

My good friend, Ambassador John Bolton, delivered the inaugural Helms Lecture in 2010 on the necessity of preserving American sovereignty in the face of President Obama's obsessive multilateralism. And some of you were fortunate to hear last year from my colleague, Senator Mike Lee, who continued Ambassador Bolton's defense of U.S. sovereignty by outlining the dangers posed to our autonomy by the misguided Law of the Sea Treaty.

Today, I too will center my remarks on the national security imperative of preserving American sovereignty by maintaining a superior national defense capability and willingness to use it abroad to protect our interests at home.

I am profoundly concerned that support for ensuring America's preeminent position is waning, predictably on the political left but also, unfortunately, on the political right. On the left, of course, are the defeatists—those who would have you believe that today's America is yesterday's Rome, that we are tracing the predictable, preordained, and inescapable path to decline. These naysayers believe that the United States' exceptionality is an arrogance to be extinguished, not a strength to be reinforced. They believe we should willingly embrace a greatly diminished position in the world, to sit at the back of the class in the alphabetical order of states.

This view is manifested in the foreign and defense policy of President Obama. "Leading from behind" is an apt description. Administration officials say they must seek approval from the U.N. Security Council for U.S. action to be legal. This Administration supports all manner of international treaties and transnational law. And, as to the need for a strong defense, the President has made clear his willingness to risk



Protect America Month

**Providing for the Common Defense
in the 21st Century**

The Heritage Foundation's Protect America Month 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.

serious degradation of our military by Budget Act sequestration.

However, my message today is not aimed at the liberals and progressives who have never been supportive of the imperative to preserve American sovereignty, but to some of my fellow conservatives who seem willing to risk it today. They do this in three ways:

- By demonstrating a willingness to cut defense beyond what's prudent,
- By opposing foreign involvement or tiring of existing commitments such as our mission in Afghanistan, and
- By obsessing about imagined threats to privacy rights to an extent that jeopardizes our war against terrorists.

The third point merits a thorough discussion that, in the interest of time, I must save for another occasion; it includes opposition to the PATRIOT Act, FISA surveillance, and, potentially, requirements to protect our private and government networks against cyber threats.

Here's what we face. There is a creeping sentiment within certain Republican circles that America is indeed in a period of decline, mostly due to runaway spending, and that we cannot, therefore, afford the kind of military we had in the past and should disengage from many areas of the world. While they are absolutely right about the spending problem, I believe they are wrong about the solution: *If defense spending is not the problem, cutting it cannot be the solution.*

The Real Spending Problem

All conservatives agree entitlement spending is out of control and must be reined in. Liberals don't—or won't. But instead of pressing harder to achieve entitlement reform, some conservatives are willing to take the easier path (actually two paths): First, allow more defense cuts; second, allow taxes to be raised. The first is devastating to national security; the second will kill economic recovery.

Now, I'm not saying never compromise. We conservatives on the Joint Select Committee were willing to accept relatively anemic entitlement reform and offered hundreds of billions in tax increases, but it was never enough for our liberal friends. I said at the outset I would consider any option—except jeopardizing our national security. Not all of my colleagues were willing to make that commitment.

WE ALL AGREE THERE IS WASTE TO BE FOUND IN THE DEFENSE BUDGET. BUT THE SEQUESTRATION CUTS GO FAR BEYOND WHAT IS RESPONSIBLE OR PRUDENT, APPLYING A MEAT AXE, NOT INTELLIGENT PRIORITY-SETTING.

I supported the Budget Control Act only because, as I explained at the time, it was inconceivable that Congress would allow sequestration to decimate our defense. And after \$487 billion in already scheduled defense cuts, no one I know believes another \$500 billion in across-the-board cuts would be anything short of disaster. Yet here we are, more than a third of the way through the year, and there is no real plan for how to avoid it. Everyone assumes it will

somehow be dealt with after the election. This is a governmental imperative of the first order, yet the conservative community isn't making much noise about it. And the President threatens a veto if whatever is done does not include a tax increase.

Let's get the usual caveats out of the way. We all agree there is waste to be found in the defense budget (though the fastest-growing part of the budget is in personnel costs, especially for health care, and nobody wants to touch that). But the sequestration cuts go far beyond what is responsible or prudent, applying a meat axe, not intelligent priority-setting. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta summed it up: The sequestration cuts would be "catastrophic."

I hope we can stipulate this is the case without further elaboration. So what to do about it?

I have been working with several of my colleagues to come up with budgetary offsets that would allow us to reverse the automatic defense cuts. Senators John McCain (R-AZ), Kelly Ayotte (R-NH), Lindsey Graham (R-SC), John Cornyn (R-TX), Marco Rubio (R-FL), and I introduced S. 2065, the Down Payment to Protect National Security Act of 2012. Our bill provides the \$109.3 billion in offsets required to replace one year of defense and non-defense sequestration. It does so in two ways. For every three federal employees that retire, only two new employees would be hired as replacements. In addition, federal employee salaries would be frozen at current levels through June 2014.

Let me be clear: We are proposing *alternative* spending cuts that would reduce the deficit in a careful

way, not the across-the-board cuts in existing law. And we do so for both defense and non-defense discretionary spending since we know we will not succeed politically if we do not do both.

We have made clear that we are open to alternative proposals, including some of the other potential offsets identified by the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction or those proposed by our House colleagues, including House Armed Services Committee Chairman Buck McKeon (R-CA) and Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI). His proposal is being voted on in the House today.

So how do we get there? One idea is to use the annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) as the legislative vehicle to carry the compromise alternative to sequestration. Efforts are already underway in both the House and Senate to get the conversation started in conjunction with the NDAA, with the hope that it might carry the eventual negotiated resolution well before a potential lame-duck session.

The essential point is this: We must prevent the devastating across-the-board cuts from taking effect in 2013, and we should have unwavering support from all conservatives for doing so, starting with House and Senate leadership. The process can begin when the full House considers the NDAA and the following week when the Senate Armed Services Committee marks up the Senate version.

America's Place in World Affairs

Let me now turn to the other issue—the debate about our place in

world affairs. Americans are tired of carrying the burden of foreign obligations, frequently unappreciated by others and always costly in blood and treasure. Writing in the *The Wall Street Journal* last year, the Hoover Institution's Shelby Steele captured this sentiment: "So we Americans cannot help but feel some ambivalence toward our singularity in the world—with its draining entanglements abroad, the selfless demands it makes on both our military and our taxpayers, and all the false charges of imperial hubris it entails."¹

THE ULTIMATE COSTS OF INACTION, IN BOTH BLOOD AND TREASURE, ARE OFTEN FAR GREATER THAN THE COSTS OF EARLY ACTION. WE NEED ONLY LOOK TO THE UNNECESSARILY DISADVANTAGEOUS CIRCUMSTANCES UNDER WHICH WE ENTERED WORLD WAR I AND WORLD WAR II AND KOREA TO SEE THAT THIS IS SO.

Consider the recent kerfuffle in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) over a relatively straightforward resolution in support of the besieged Syrian people. Five SFRC Republicans (and one SFRC Democrat) voted against a resolution reaffirming "that it is the policy of the United States that the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people cannot be realized so long as Bashar al-Assad remains in power and that he must step aside."²

Only four SFRC Republicans supported the resolution, compared to nine SFRC Democrats. There are only three possible reasons for their opposition: The aspirations of the Syrians *can* be realized with Assad

as President, he should not step aside, or we should not say these views represent U.S. policy. I assume it was concern that the third point might ultimately lead to taking some kind of action that led my Republican colleagues to oppose the statement.

I would argue that America loses much in eschewing moral positions even if they do not lead to action, let alone military action. Calling the Soviet Union an "evil empire" made a big difference even without military action by the U.S. In the case of Syria, even small gestures reaffirming the illegitimacy of Bashar Assad's regime send a powerful signal to the mullahs in Tehran. And in those cases that clearly call for action (because of the implications for U.S. national security), I believe history is quite clear that the ultimate costs of inaction, in both blood and treasure, are often far greater than the costs of early action. We need only look to the unnecessarily disadvantageous circumstances under which we entered World War I and World War II and Korea to see that this is so.

Unfortunately, we do not usually have the luxury of choosing when and where we must confront evil in the world. Consider that a cursory review of newspapers in the days before 9/11 reveals that our national political conversation was focused significantly on embryonic stem-cell research. Few then could have imagined that American military forces would spend the next 10 years fighting bloody ground battles in places like Kabul, Kandahar, Baghdad, and Basra.

The point: It is likely America will need to act in the future somewhere in the world for our own security purposes, even though we cannot

1. Shelby Steele, "Obama and the Burden of Exceptionalism," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 1, 2011.
2. S. Res. 435, "Calling for democratic change in Syria, and for other purposes," 112th Congress, April 25, 2012.

today predict where or when. We cannot retreat behind a Maginot Line of our East and West Coast. We can expect to be engaged beyond our borders.

Some say, “You’re too eager to spend money on defense and look for trouble in the world.” Actually, it’s quite the opposite: America’s global security umbrella remains the best guarantor *against* armed conflict between nation-states, and it is the best deterrent against terrorist violence. Obviously this doesn’t mean we should act recklessly or beyond our means. But just imagine how much more aggressive North Korea or China might be without U.S. forces in East Asia, or what Iran might do without a robust American presence near the Persian Gulf.

I believe Jesse Helms would concur with our effort today to make the case for preserving a robust U.S. military capable of backing our security goals. In fact, in 1976, in an address to the Conservative Political Action Conference, Senator Helms spoke of a similar crisis of confidence, and he admonished us not to bow to the pervading cynicism about America’s role in the world:

As a nation, we are at the height of our power after two hundred years. Yet there are those who say we are at the end of our power, and there are those among us who say that we have no business having power anyway. It is a strange refrain that says it is better by far to abdicate, that it is better by far to quit. Some seem to be ashamed of the attributes of power, and others frankly proclaim that we should divest

ourselves of any interest outside of our nation.³

We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Senator Helms because he did not throw in the towel when the “going got tough.” Moreover, we know that on the biggest national security questions of his day, although Senator Helms often found himself out of step with fashionable opinion, he persevered, and history proved him right time and time again.

In the 1970s, it was fashionable to accept the Soviet Empire as a permanent feature of the global landscape. But Senator Helms established a friendship with the great Russian dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn; he maintained solidarity with other freedom fighters behind the Iron Curtain; and he continued to speak out against the evils of Communism.

In the 1980s, it was fashionable to condemn the Nicaraguan Contras and ignore human-rights abuses by the Communist Sandinistas. But Senator Helms stood firm in his support for Nicaraguan democracy, and he was eventually vindicated when the Sandinistas finally agreed to hold a free election, which they lost spectacularly to the democratic opposition.

In the 1990s, it was fashionable to celebrate the virtues of international law and of international treaties. But Senator Helms remained a stalwart defender of U.S. constitutional sovereignty.

When he finally retired from the Senate in 2002, Jesse Helms was hailed as one of the most consequential American legislators of the previous quarter-century. He believed in America, and he refused

to relinquish the fight for our nation’s soul. He called on Americans to demonstrate not only to ourselves, but to the world that as a nation we stand by American values—freedom, rule of law, sovereignty—both at home and abroad. As Helms himself put it:

With all of our accomplishments, with all of our wealth, with all of our technology, we cannot fulfill our leadership role without a firm conviction that our cause is meritorious. We must believe that we deserve to win—or more specifically, that we, as individuals, have the moral strength and courage to do what is necessary to win.⁴

Remember President Reagan’s answer to the question about his doctrine for the Cold War: “We win, they lose.” And Margaret Thatcher’s admonition, “Don’t go wobbly on me.” These were the leaders who were in it for the long haul—to win. Today’s conservatives must be equally committed, even when we are tired and stressed—remaining true to the doctrines of Thatcher, Reagan, and Helms.

Determining America’s Appropriate Leadership Role

How do we determine the appropriate American leadership role? We don’t have time here to evaluate every U.S. foreign policy position, but I can lay out a way to analyze the issues, starting with what I believe is the U.S. *vision* and working down through *objective*, *strategy*, and *tactics*.

I submit, and I am confident Senator Helms would concur, that

3. Jesse Helms, speech before the Conservative Political Action Conference, Washington, D.C., February 14, 1976.

4. Ibid.

a workable definition of America's vision is a world in which our idea of liberty is preserved for us and accepted by—but not imposed upon—others. Our objective should be to protect American sovereignty and our ability to influence those things that affect our national interests.

What that means strategically is that we must prepare and arrange our assets to achieve our goals through diplomacy, economic strength, and military power. This means, among other things, shaping the international environment so that others can make decisions compatible with our goals.

WE MUST PREPARE AND ARRANGE OUR ASSETS TO ACHIEVE OUR GOALS THROUGH DIPLOMACY, ECONOMIC STRENGTH, AND MILITARY POWER.

In other words, we must prepare for future strategic challenges by preserving both the *capability* and the *flexibility* to address a vast range of possible contingencies. An example is the long-standing U.S. strategy of maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent to protect both the U.S. and other nations that rely on us, which allows them to forgo developing their own nuclear weapons, thus contributing to our non-proliferation interests.

What that means tactically is that conservatives should adhere to a set of general principles, such as:

- To prevent, rather than have to respond to, crisis;
- To weigh the costs of inaction, not just the costs of action;
- To act in concert with others when possible but unilaterally if necessary;
- To define defense preparedness not by arbitrary budget calculations, but by threats to U.S. security;
- To avoid artificial constraints—like treaties or U.N. approvals—that would inhibit America from acting in its self-interest; and
- To never leave any doubt about our ability or will to act.

There are many other considerations, and reasonable people will disagree about specific application of the strategy and tactics. What should never be in disagreement, however, is the objective: the federal government's constitutional obligation to secure the defense of the country even when it requires significant sacrifice.

So here's my charge: Help explain the importance of preserving American sovereignty and the necessity of maintaining peace through strength, including to fellow conservatives who may be tempted to give in to isolationist pressures or allow further reductions in defense spending or simply to remain silent on the sidelines.

If our sovereignty is priceless, then must we not be willing to spend what is necessary? And to insist on fiscal responsibility and eschew tax policies that would prevent the kind of economic growth we need to maintain our preeminent position in the world? This is something on which *all* conservatives should agree, and the time to unite is now.

As Steele wrote, "America seems to be facing a pivotal moment: Do we move ahead by advancing or receding—by reaffirming the values that made us exceptional or by letting go of those values, so that a creeping mediocrity begins to spare us the burdens of greatness?"⁵ We all know the answer.

Fellow conservatives, we must champion American sovereignty and liberty, guaranteed by a strong national defense, and resist the siren song of global retreat. The world will be a better place with another "American century," and so will the people of the United States. 🇺🇸

5. Steele, "Obama and the Burden of Exceptionalism."