

Taking Aim at the Pentagon Budget

Robert Dreyfuss | March 23, 2011

For the first time since the end of the cold war, there's a real possibility that the post-9/11 fever that sent US military spending shooting upward will break and that the Pentagon's budget will fall sharply. But it won't be easy.

On the surface, it might not seem as if cuts are in the offing. After thirteen consecutive years of growth, between 1998 and 2011, spending on the military has reached an all-time high, and for 2012 Defense Secretary Robert Gates is asking Congress to authorize yet another increase, seeking \$553 billion, plus an additional \$118 billion for Iraq and Afghanistan, for a total of \$671 billion. Not only is the White House seeking more money; Congress—even with the deficit-obsessed, Tea Party/Republican majority in the House—has so far refused to wield the budget ax against the Defense Department.

Yet longtime analysts say a confluence of events has emerged that will change that. “Five years from now, we'll turn around and the defense budget will be a lot lower than we thought it was going to be five years ago, and we'll look back and say, Wow,” says Gordon Adams, a Stimson Center fellow and American University professor who's been analyzing military spending for four decades.

That's not because the military-industrial complex is ready for cuts. The so-called Iron Triangle, the powerful nexus that includes the Pentagon, military contractors and lobbyists, and hawks on the Congressional armed services committees, will resist cuts every step of the way. “If you leave it to the Iron Triangle, it won't come down,” says Adams. “But it will come down, and what will drive it are the outside variables, which create a tidal wave that hits defense spending.” What's creating that wave, say Adams and other experts, are two intersecting currents. A politics of debt and deficit reduction has taken hold in Washington, tied to an economic crisis that has convinced many that the United States can no longer afford an oversized Pentagon. And for the public, the decade-long trauma of 9/11, which fueled the “war on terror,” has finally begun to ease. War-weary Americans have turned decisively against the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and, according to polls, voters support cuts in military spending. All that creates space on Capitol Hill to take on the Iron Triangle.

Winslow Wheeler, director of the Straus Military Reform Project at the liberal Center for Defense Information and editor of the new book *The Pentagon Labyrinth*, points to major studies by think tanks and task forces calling for sweeping military cuts as a sign that things are changing. “We're in a period of a shift in tectonic plates when it comes to the defense budget,” he says.

In 2010 a series of high-powered reports called for big cuts in military spending, with each projecting reductions of 15–20 percent of the Pentagon budget. In June the Sustainable Defense Task Force, organized by Representatives Barney Frank and Ron Paul, outlined a plan to cut \$960 billion between 2011 and 2020, including cuts in the nuclear arsenal, troop deployments in Europe and Asia, the size of the Navy, a wide range of costly weapons systems and reforms in military pay scales and the Pentagon's healthcare system. In September the libertarian Cato Institute published a report, “Budgetary Savings From Military Restraint,” that outlined \$1.2 trillion in cuts over ten years, including a one-third reduction in the troop strength of the Army and Marines. In November a debt-reduction task force organized by the centrist, establishment-oriented Bipartisan Policy Center released a plan, “Restoring America's Future,” that proposed a five-year freeze in Defense Department spending at current levels and then a cap on future growth, which would save \$1.1 trillion over a decade.

But the most startling report of all was released in December by the bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, created by President Obama and chaired by former Republican Senator Alan Simpson and Democrat Erskine Bowles, who served as President Clinton's White House chief of staff. Though it fudged the numbers a bit, making it hard to pin down how far its proposed cuts would go, the panel's reductions in military spending could amount to as much as \$650 billion to \$1 trillion over ten years. “The Simpson-Bowles commission came up with nearly a trillion dollars in cuts, and nobody blinked an eye,” says Wheeler.

* * *

Well, almost nobody. A coalition of hawkish think tanks—led by the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation and the Foreign Policy Initiative, a neoconservative outfit led by William Kristol of *The Weekly Standard*—lambasted the Simpson-Bowles report as a mortal threat. The coalition, Defending Defense, has trotted out claims about China’s military power, the threat of radical Islam and the need to maintain US hegemony worldwide in its effort to rally support for the military establishment. They’re alarmed at the sudden erosion of support for the Pentagon in the Republican Party—not only among libertarian, often isolationist Tea Party types but among traditional Republicans, too.

According to Capitol Hill lobbyists and think-tank military analysts, a contingent of Republican stalwarts—including Senators Tom Coburn and Mike Crapo, both of whom served on the Simpson-Bowles panel, along with two senators from Georgia, Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson—are open to arguments about hefty military cuts. And GOP Senator Jeff Sessions, an ultraconservative who serves on the Budget Committee, cited what he calls the debt “crisis” to suggest that it’s time to hack away at Pentagon outlays. “I’m saying the message is clear that we need to do some things now, and the Defense Department can’t be absolved from those challenges,” he said in early March. On the outside, a passel of conservative activists, including Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform and David Keene of the American Conservative Union, co-wrote a letter urging Congress not to exempt the Pentagon when looking to save money [see Dreyfuss, “[GOP Fires at the Pentagon](#) [1],” February 14].

Despite their bravado, Kristol et al. may realize that, increasingly, defending defense is a hopeless task. The Pentagon budget has grown so apocalyptically that an emerging coalition of deficit hawks, liberals who back an expanded social safety net and stimulus spending for job-creating projects, antiwar activists and traditional conservatives who resent the neoconservative über-hawks ought to be able to force reductions.

According to figures Wheeler compiled for *The Pentagon Labyrinth*, the military’s base budget of \$549 billion in 2011 is just the starting point for calculating military dollars. Adding in war spending (\$159 billion), homeland defense (\$44 billion), Veterans Affairs (\$122 billion), interest on defense-related debt (\$48 billion) and other items pushes the total to more than \$1 trillion a year. In constant dollars, adjusted for inflation, the regular military budget, not including the add-ons, has doubled from a low of about \$360 billion in 1998 to more than \$739 billion in 2011. It’s so much money that, as the Bipartisan Policy report points out, by 2009 US spending on military research and development alone, about \$80 billion, surpassed China’s entire military budget by more than \$10 billion. The budget for the US Special Forces alone is greater than the total military spending of nearly 100

countries; overall, the United States spends about as much on defense as the rest of the world combined.

Proposals to cut the military always start with personnel. Although many assume that the Pentagon spends most of its money on wars and war matériel, from jet fighters to aircraft carriers, the biggest chunk of the budget is for administration, overhead, salaries and benefits, which make up about 42 percent. So bringing down costs can’t be done without massive cuts in the number of troops. The Bipartisan Policy Center calls for a reduction of 275,000, including 92,000 in the Army and Marines added during the buildup, 80,000 from deployments in Europe and Asia and 100,000 more from noncombat, infrastructure jobs held by uniformed personnel at the Pentagon.

According to estimates from the Frank/Paul task force, over the next decade the United States could save \$347 billion by reducing its military presence in Europe and Asia by one-third (\$80 billion), rolling back the amount of ground forces (\$147 billion), reforming the military pay structure, reforming Tricare (the generous healthcare program for military retirees) and reducing money for recruiting (\$120 billion). Another \$217 billion could be saved between 2011 and 2020 by reducing the Navy fleet from 286 ships to 230 (\$127 billion), retiring two aircraft carriers and two naval air wings (\$50 billion), reducing procurement of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and retiring two Air Force tactical fighter wings (\$40 billion). Another \$22 billion could be saved by canceling or delaying purchases of the MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft and the KC-X aerial refueling tanker.

* * *

Broadly speaking, public opinion no longer favors military spending. Support for the war in Afghanistan, which absorbs \$10 billion a month, has dropped off a cliff, with two-thirds of Americans saying the war is no longer worth fighting. Other polling shows that when asked to choose between cuts in Pentagon spending and undermining the social safety net, the public chooses cutting the Pentagon. A March poll revealed that 51 percent favor reductions in military spending versus just 28 percent who would cut Medicare and Medicaid and 18 percent who’d cut Social Security. And those numbers ignore the fact that for the most part, as Wheeler argues, the public is blissfully unaware of how enormous the Pentagon budget is. He cites other polling to show that the carefully tended myth, fed by hawks, of an underfunded Pentagon has confused many voters. “Fifty-eight percent of Americans know that Pentagon spending is larger than any other nation, but almost none know it is up to seven times that of China,” Wheeler wrote recently. “Most had no idea the defense budget is larger than federal spending for education, Medicare or interest on the debt.”

But although polls show that Americans aren’t enthused about spending more money on the military, that doesn’t

instantly translate into a broad coalition that can put pressure on Congress and the White House. “There’s certainly momentum on the grassroots side,” says Paul Kawika Martin, political and communications director of Peace Action. “But I haven’t seen the coalition yet that can make inroads on this. For instance, a lot of unions support many of these weapons systems as job creators. We need to get unions on board, and we’re not there yet.”

If Democrats want to rally unions—and military-industry workers in particular—to support cuts, they’d do well to propose defense conversion plans, says Miriam Pemberton of the Institute for Policy Studies, who co-wrote a report last year called “The Green Dividend.” In it, she suggests steering Defense Department money into green technology, especially in the energy field. In the 1990s, Pemberton points out, more than 2.5 million jobs were lost as the military was downsized after the cold war, but the vast bulk of the savings was channeled into deficit reduction, not reinvestment.

The last time military spending dropped significantly was during that period, from 1989 through 1998. According to the Bipartisan Policy report, “national defense spending fell 28 percent in constant dollars, the active duty force shrank by more than 700,000, the force structure was consolidated, the defense civilian workforce dropped by over 300,000, and procurement budgets fell in excess of 50 percent.”

Could such a reduction happen now? William Hartung, director of the Arms and Security Initiative at the New America Foundation and the author of a book about Lockheed Martin, *Prophets of War*, said there’s no reason the Iron Triangle can’t be defeated now, just as it was in the 1990s. “The military-industrial complex is not all-powerful,” he says. “There’s a sense that they always get what they want. But they don’t win every battle.” Hartung points out that although the Obama administration hasn’t yet cut deeply into the Pentagon’s wallet, it has already cut, canceled or delayed a number of expensive, unneeded or redundant weapons systems like the F-22 fighter and the Marine Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, along with the alternate engine for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. “It’s kind of a salvage operation, trying to hold off real cuts,” says Hartung, who believes pressure to cut military spending will begin to be felt in the fall.

If a reduction does happen, it won’t come all at once. “Defense is like a big aircraft carrier, and you can’t turn it around right away,” says Lawrence Korb, a military analyst at the liberal Center for American Progress, himself a former Pentagon official. Korb says few if any cuts will come before the 2015 budget cycle. The fight will have to start right away, but it will take a while. “If you start now, you can take out \$100 billion a year by 2015. That’s realistic.” Charles Knight, co-director of the Project on Defense Alternatives, which has produced its own detailed plan for restraining spending, agrees. “Defense budgets

rarely get cut in presidential election years, and I don’t expect much in 2012 or 2013,” he says. Beyond that, however, he anticipates reductions. According to Knight, even within the armed services there’s a creeping awareness that the gravy train is slowing down, and they’re coming to realize that counterinsurgency wars like the ones in Iraq and Afghanistan are far too costly to wage in the future. “There’s a growing sense in the military that if we continue to fight these kinds of wars, there won’t be money available for what they want in terms of hardware,” he says. “So I think the military is going to be ready to bargain on reducing their end strength in order to preserve modernization. There are lots of people in the military who are very critical of the counterinsurgency doctrine.”

So far there have been rumblings in Congress about cutting the military, but little to show for it. During the long-running effort by House Republicans to force big cuts in so-called “nondefense discretionary spending”—that one-sixth of the budget that doesn’t include the military, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid or interest on the debt—there were scattered votes to cut the military, too. All but one failed. The one that passed, canceling production of an alternate engine for the F-35, was something of an exception. “In that case, the president, the defense secretary and the secretary of the Air Force were against it, and you had two companies, General Electric and Pratt & Whitney, fighting over it, so you could cancel out the corporate lobbying,” says Peace Action’s Martin.

Still, in analyzing the series of votes to cut bits and pieces of the Pentagon’s cash in February and March, Martin says it is apparent that there is a healthy contingent of three dozen GOP House members and up to 120 Democrats who are consistently voting against the military. Although it’s too early to say if it’s a trend, and though the total from both parties in the House is far short of the 218 needed to enact legislation, it is a signal that for the first time since the late 1990s there’s potential on Capitol Hill for real pushback against the Pentagon. “The votes so far show a change in direction,” says Laura Peterson, senior policy analyst for Taxpayers for Common Sense. “We’re going around, talking to members, meeting with staffers. I will optimistically predict that more and more people will come out later this year when these appropriations bills start being taken up.”

Indeed, as the uprising in Wisconsin showed, it’s possible that over the next few months the political dynamic will shift unpredictably against the military in the debate over the 2012 appropriations, especially if there’s resistance by Democrats to a GOP campaign to force massive budget cuts.

As the legislative calendar moves forward, there will be chances to lay down markers. The first is the overall budget resolution, which could contain language challenging Gates’s request for \$671 billion, perhaps even proposing a five-year freeze in military spending at 2010,

or even 2008, levels. The second will be enactment of a law increasing the debt ceiling, which might include significant reductions in military outlays. David Berseau, a senior adviser at the conservative Center for Strategic and International Studies who served at the Pentagon under four defense secretaries, suggested at a recent forum on Capitol Hill that because Congress will have to raise the debt ceiling by \$3 trillion by 2012, members of Congress might do it in four stages, every six months, and that in each one they could require \$50 billion in military cuts, spread out over five or ten years. Chopping it up into small increments like that would be a lot easier than doing it all at once, he said. "At DoD, \$50 billion isn't even real money."

Even if cuts are made, Congress is unlikely to propose a sweeping new approach to the Pentagon's mission. Unlike, say, the plans put forward by the Frank/Paul task force and the Cato Institute, which ask why we need such a large military budget, Congress is apt to tackle it piecemeal. "Conceptualizing on Capitol Hill is an oxymoron. There is nobody on Capitol Hill doing that," says Adams. "That's why [cuts] will be incremental, salami-sliced. They'll be hunting around for targets of opportunity, looking to stretch out this or that weapons system."

Adams compares it to trench warfare. "Each year is a trench, and slowly the secretary and the armed services back up, back up, back up, and each year they take a little less." The first skirmishes were in 2009, and they've gathered momentum ever since, he says, even though they haven't translated yet into tangible reductions. Referring to the string of failed amendments to reduce outlays during the votes on "continuing resolutions" to avert a government shutdown in March, Adams says, "The thing that's interesting in 2011 isn't that slew of amendments on defense but that House Republicans' first instinct was to support a continuing resolution freezing spending at 2010 levels."

It's unfortunate that Congressional Democrats (aside from Frank's task force) have shied away from rethinking defense. Failure to do so could leave the party stuck in the deficit-reduction box, in which cuts in Pentagon spending will have to be matched or exceeded by cuts in nonmilitary programs, including education, the environment, healthcare and entitlements. A comprehensive approach by Democratic leaders could mobilize the public's unhappiness with military spending.

Naturally, it's foolish to underestimate the power of the Iron Triangle. To make sure the thirteen Republican freshmen on the House Armed Services Committee didn't get any ideas about wielding Tea Party budget axes against the Pentagon, the committee's chair, Buck McKeon, organized a lucrative fundraiser for what he called the "Lucky 13," inviting them to meet check-bearing lobbyists from a range of military contractors.

And even programs like Tricare are proving exceedingly difficult to rein in. For several years, Secretary Gates has been trying to raise premiums for it. Tricare absorbs about one-tenth of all Pentagon spending, and its costs have skyrocketed, from \$19 billion ten years ago to \$53 billion today. Despite repeated efforts, however, Gates has failed. John Spratt, a retired Democrat who represented South Carolina's 5th Congressional District from 1983 through 2010, tells the story of a town hall meeting back home. "In the back of the room, an old veteran stands up," recalled Spratt. "And he says, 'Congressman, have you ever crawled through the sands of North Africa and used a piece of piano wire to strangle a kraut?' And I said, 'No.' And he said, 'Well, I have. And no one better get between me and my healthcare benefits.'"

Somewhere, possibly at a plant in South Carolina, the military-industrial complex is producing lots of piano wire.

Source URL: <http://www.thenation.com/article/159431/taking-aim-pentagon-budget>

Links:

[1] <http://www.thenation.com/article/158094/gop-fires-pentagon>