

The Dangerous Debate over Cutting Military Spending

The US Deficit, 2013

"[Defense spending](#) is unlike other spending, because protecting the nation is a government's first job. It's in the Constitution, as highways, school lunches and [Social Security](#) are not."

Robert J. Samuelson is an author and journalist who writes a weekly economics column for the *Washington Post*. In the following viewpoint, he argues that while spending on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has contributed to the deficit and that the deficit will automatically become lower when the wars are over, the amount of difference it will make will be much, much smaller than is popularly believed or reported. He says that the [United States](#) spends much less on the military than it did in the 1950s and 1960s, when the country had less money, countering arguments that America cannot afford its military. He also maintains that when those arguing for cuts claim that the United States' expenditures are so much larger than other countries' on military, they fail to take into account that it costs the United States far more to pay for its troops, contractors, and supplies than it does other countries. Further, he adds, countries such as [China](#) have greater manpower in their military than the United States. Samuelson concludes that any waste or inefficiency in the Pentagon budget has already been addressed through major cuts, and further cuts to an already streamlined military would hamper its ability to effectively address terrorism and other threats to [national security](#).

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. How many combat battalions did the US Army have in 1990, according to Samuelson?
2. How much larger is China's military manpower than the United States', according to the viewpoint?
3. When does Samuelson say was the last time defense spending was below 3 percent of national income?

We shouldn't gut defense. A central question of our budget debates is how much we allow growing spending on social programs to crowd out the military and, in effect, force the United States into a dangerous, slow-motion disarmament.

People who see military cuts as an easy way to reduce [budget deficits](#) forget that this has already occurred. From the late 1980s to 2010, the number of America's [armed forces](#) dropped from 2.1 million men and women to about 1.4 million. The downsizing—the "peace dividend" from the end of the Cold War—was not undone by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 1990, the Army had 172 combat battalions, the Navy 546 ships and the Air Force 4,355 fighters; today, those numbers are 100 battalions, 288 ships and 1,990 fighters.

True, Iraq and Afghanistan raised defense budgets. As these wars conclude, lower spending will shrink overall deficits. But the savings will be smaller than many expect because the costs—though considerable—were smaller than they thought. From fiscal year 2001 to 2011, these wars cost \$1.3 trillion, says the Congressional Budget Office. That's 4.4 percent of the \$29.7 trillion of federal

spending over those years. In fiscal 2011, the cost was about \$159 billion, 12 percent of the deficit (\$1.3 trillion) and 4 percent of total spending (\$3.6 trillion).

Three bogus arguments are commonly made to rationalize big military cuts.

First, we can't afford today's military.

Not so. How much we spend is a political decision. In the 1950s and 1960s, when the country was much poorer, 40 percent to 50 percent of the [federal budget](#) routinely went to defense, representing 8 to 10 percent of our national income. By 2010, a wealthier America devoted only 20 percent of federal spending and 4.8 percent of national income to the military. Spending on social programs replaced military spending, but that shift has gone too far.

Second, we spend so much more than anyone else that cutbacks won't make us vulnerable.

In 2009, U.S. defense spending was six times China's and 13 times [Russia's](#), according to estimates from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. The trouble with these numbers is that they don't truly adjust for differences in income levels. U.S. salary and procurement costs are orders of magnitude higher than China's, for example. But China's military manpower is about 50 percent greater than ours, and it has a fighter fleet four-fifths as large. This doesn't mean that China's military technology yet equals ours, but differences in reported spending are wildly misleading.

Third, the Pentagon has so much inefficiency and waste that sizable cuts won't jeopardize our fighting capability.

Of course there is waste and inefficiency. These are being targeted in the \$450 billion of additional cuts over 10 years—beyond savings from Iraq and Afghanistan—that President Obama and Congress agreed to this year. Former defense secretary Robert Gates had already cut major programs including the F-22 stealth fighter that he judged unneeded. Savings can be had from overhauling Tricare, the generous health insurance program for service members and retirees. But like most bureaucratic organizations, the Pentagon will always have some waste. It's a myth that it all can be surgically removed without weakening the military.

Defense spending is unlike other spending, because protecting the nation is a government's first job. It's in the Constitution, as highways, school lunches and Social Security are not. We should spend as much as needed, but that amount is never clear. Even in the Cold War, when the Soviet Union's capabilities were intensively analyzed, there was no scientific and exact number.

Now our concept of national security—and demands on the military—has become expansive and murky. Aside from preventing attacks on the homeland, goals include: stopping terrorism; countering China's rise; combating cyber warfare; limiting nuclear proliferation ([Iran](#), [North Korea](#)); averting the loss or theft of [nuclear weapons](#) (Pakistan?); safeguarding sea routes and some major oil producers; and providing humanitarian assistance in major natural disasters.

By itself, defense spending does not ensure that our national power will be wisely or effectively deployed. This depends on our civilian and military leaders. But squeezing defense will limit these leaders' choices and expose U.S. troops to greater risk. Those who advocate deep cuts need to specify which goals—combating cyber warfare, countering China, fighting terrorism—should be curtailed. Would that be good for us? The world?

America's military advantage stems from advanced technology and intensive troop training. Obama repeatedly pledges to maintain America's strength, but the existing cuts may do otherwise. Even before these, defense spending was headed below 3 percent of national income, the lowest level since 1940. The need to maintain an adequate military is another reason why spending on social programs needs to be cut and taxes need to be raised.

Further Readings

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