

## Are Cuts to the Defense Budget Necessary?

As the congressional “super committee” works to reduce the federal deficit, the defense budget is one of the most contested items on the chopping block. Supporters of cutting defense spending say it’s the right time to do it. Opponents say the military can’t afford more cuts. **Edited by Kira Zalan**



**By Gordon Adams**  
Professor at American University; senior budget official for national security in the Clinton administration

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**YES** America has never been militarily safer than it is today. No nation poses an existential threat to the country. The threat of a terrorist attack is diminishing. Cyber-warriors can attack the Internet, but our defenses against this challenge are largely civilian. We’re not about to invade Iran or Pakistan. And a rising China is somewhere future, with a military we currently dwarf.

Today, the American military is the only military in the world that can steam, fly, and deploy globally. It is the only military that has truly global logistics, infrastructure, communications, transportation, and intelligence. It has more ships than any country, more tanks, more aircraft, more military transportation, and refueling capability. No other country, not even China, attempts to build such a global force.

Nor is it a “worn out” force. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, Army vice chief of staff, was asked in July what it would take to return to the 2001 level of military readiness and he told the truth: Ten years of fighting “gives you a level of readiness ... that has never been as high as it is today. ... We never want to go back.”

Nor is it burdened with worn-out equipment that now needs to be repaired. At a cost of \$1 trillion [READ MORE »](#)



**By J. Randy Forbes**  
Republican from Virginia; chairman of the House Armed Services Readiness Subcommittee

**NO** The American military is on the brink. Not only are U.S. military leaders facing monumental budget challenges backed by minimal strategic guidance, they face shrinking forces armed with aging equipment that often fails to meet basic readiness standards.

Our military leaders have provided candid but alarming testimony on the specter of further cuts. Marine Corps Gen. Joseph Dunford said, “We will not be there to deter our potential adversaries. ... And we certainly won’t be there to contain small crises before they become major conflagrations.” Army Gen. Peter Chiarelli cautioned, “We will end up with a force that is not modernized, is an unbalanced force, and in the end, it will cost us lives.” Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta went as far as to say that such cuts would amount to “shooting ourselves in the head.”

Making matters worse, the force’s size has been declining since 1990. Then, we had a 546-ship Navy; today we have 288. In 1990 the U.S. Army had 76 brigades; today, only 45. Two decades ago, the Air Force had twice as many fighter squadrons and bombers as today. This dwindling force is also aging. The average age of Navy ships is 20 years. Air Force bombers average [READ MORE »](#)

## TWO TAKES

**YES**

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over the past 10 years, we have completely upgraded all the Army's vehicles, bought more ammunition than we expected, acquired a whole new fleet of F-22s, and C-17 cargo aircraft for the Air Force, and a lot of new naval vessels.

Today we have a big security problem: a deep economic recession combined with a yawning federal deficit. Our national debt, as the recently retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, has said, is "the most significant threat to our national security."

It is time to discipline defense, along with the rest of the federal budget, and target tax and spending policies for an economic recovery. The defense budget has more than doubled over the past decade, rising to constant-dollar levels unprecedented, in peace or war, since 1945. This surge of funds meant, as Adm. Mullen put it in January 2011, that the Defense Department "lost our ability to prioritize, to make hard decisions, to do tough analysis, to make trades."

Now it is time to restore order at the department and bring defense budgets back into line. There are lots of good ideas about how to do that, sensible ideas, that do not "hollow out" the mili-

tary. At this moment of transition out of Iraq, we need to re-look at how we use the military. We should not be asking the military to "do more with less," we should be asking them to do less with less, to set mission priorities in a safer world.

The challenge is doing a build-down right. We have done three of them since the end of the Korean War and we have not "gotten them wrong." The build-down of the 1990s left in place a force that used Saddam Hussein as a speed bump in 2003.

If the Defense Department's projected plan for the next 10 years were lowered by \$1 trillion, that would be a 17 percent reduction in resources, pretty modest as defense build-downs go. The last three build-downs have lowered defense budgets 30 percent in constant dollars.

It is time to stop whining and get down to business. An orderly build-down would be good for the nation, for a disciplined Defense Department, for the budget, and for the economy. And it would leave in place a globally dominant, streamlined military, plenty capable of serving the nation's security needs. ●

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**NO**

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34 years old and the Marines' Amphibious Assault Vehicles average 35 years old. By skipping a generation of modernization, we have strained today's already war-weary force.

Despite challenges our military faces today, Congress and the president unwisely cut roughly \$450 billion from national defense in the Budget Control Act. This short-sighted bill has also set into motion the disastrous possibility of \$600 billion more in defense cuts. Such indiscriminate cuts would likely inflict irreparable harm not just to capabilities and institutions, but more importantly to our men and women in uniform.

Some believe such expansive cuts can be achieved through little more than ending our current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This simply isn't true. Others want a smaller, regionally focused military, transforming the United States into simply "one among many." Some acknowledge budget cuts will reduce the military, but pretend this represents an "acceptable risk" with historical precedent. These advocates of a

smaller military point to the late '90s and ignore the lessons learned at the outset of our current conflicts. Once a major crisis emerges or America is challenged on more than one front, our military will be far too small and casualties far too high. Instead of returning to defense planning schemes of the 1990s, the president and lawmakers would be wise to note the rapid military buildup of nations like China, as highlighted recently by Panetta, and the threat such nations pose to regional stability and enduring American influence.

Former House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ike Skelton recently testified that, during his 34 years in Congress, the United States was involved in 12 military contingencies, only one of which was expected. This debunks the myth many believe that we can rely upon smaller defense budgets due to an unfounded ability to predict where and how the military will be needed in the future.

When building our military, we buy an insurance policy to counter threats we can predict as well as those we cannot. Any other approach simply ignores history. Our leaders ought to drop the defense budget ax until we can truly grasp the consequences of decisions to cut defense spending. ●

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**What Do You Think?** Should Congress cut the defense budget? Can U.S. military afford budget cuts? E-mail your thoughts to [letters@usnews.com](mailto:letters@usnews.com).