



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on March 21, 2011

Published in the issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 27, No. 06

Can We Cut “Defense” Spending?

Andrew Ferguson of the *Weekly Standard* summed up the neoconservative case against cutting U.S. defense spending in a February 21 article entitled “The Stockman Temptation.” In Ferguson’s article, he recollected that President Reagan’s Budget Director David Stockman had told Reagan back in the early 1980s that he must cut the defense budget in order to balance the budget. “Defense is not a budget issue,” Reagan responded. “You spend what you need.”



AP Images

Reagan’s statement revealed both an undeniable truth as well as the essential question on the appropriate level of defense spending. Nobody who believes in nationhood would argue that the nation shouldn’t spend what it needs to defend the territory and citizens of the United States; without that defense spending we would soon no longer have a nation at all. On the other hand, only the economically ignorant would argue that unnecessary spending on armaments and soldiers would be anything but a tragic drag on the economy.

Needed Spending?

The essential part of Reagan’s statement was the word “need.” The United States now spends 54 percent of the money expended worldwide on defense, according to the Swedish-based Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s 2010 yearbook, i.e., *more than the rest of the world combined*. In real dollars, that’s approximately \$1 trillion per year in defense/security programs, once Defense Department outlays, the cost of the Iraq and Afghan Wars, and security spending in other federal agencies (such as Homeland Security, State, Energy, HHS, and intelligence) are included. It’s a cost of nearly \$9,000 per household in the United States every year.

Thus, with America in a budget crisis, many people are beginning to ask the essential questions:

- How much spending do we really *need*?
- Does the nation really need to spend more than the rest of the whole world combined to be safe, or is spending only more than the three or four next biggest spenders on defense enough?
- Can the United States leverage its uniquely advantageous global geographic position — isolated from much of the world by two oceans — to spend a little less than the next biggest spender?

One odd pair of Congressmen have decided the U.S. government can be safe and still spend a little less on defense: Representatives Ron Paul (R-Texas) and Barney Frank (D-Mass.). Last summer Paul, arguably the most conservative Congressman in Congress, and Frank, arguably the most liberal, proposed more than \$100 billion in cuts in the defense budget for each of the next 10 years, partly based upon scaling back American troop commitments to Europe and some other foreign bases. The two noted that though the United States provided security for Europe and Korea during the Cold War



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when the two regions were impoverished from war, it's time to pull our troops out. The two argued in the capital-based periodical *The Hill*: "Sixty-five years later, we continue to play that role long after there is any justification for it.... The nations of Western Europe now collectively have greater resources at their command than we do, yet they continue to depend overwhelmingly on American taxpayers to provide for their defense." Frank and Paul argue that this defense spending no longer fulfills a defensive "need" for protecting American citizens and their property. Some of their suggested savings include:

- \$80 billion: Reduce troops in Europe and Asia by 50,000 (one-quarter of the total);
- \$147 billion: Roll back Army and Marine Corps growth as wars in Iraq and Afghanistan end;
- \$176.6 billion: Reduce U.S. navy fleet to 230 ships and retire two (of 11) aircraft carriers;
- \$ 157 billion: Cut or eliminate weapons systems — the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, MV-22 Osprey, kC-X Tanker, and Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle — and cut \$50 billion in research;
- \$113.5 billion: Reduce the U.S. nuclear arsenal; cancel the Trident II missile program; retire 1,000 deployed warheads, seven Ohio-class SSBNs (ballistic missile submarines), and 160 Minuteman missiles;
- \$81 billion: Trim nuclear weapons and space missile defense spending;
- \$120 billion: Reduced personnel costs by reforming military pay and healthcare systems;
- \$100 billion: Require commensurate savings in command, support, and infrastructure as military is reduced.

One might criticize the Paul-Frank commission because it appears to be heavily based on cutting weapons programs, and one can reasonably argue about which weapons programs should or should not be cut. What's not debatable is that if the United States closes its bases abroad and follows George Washington's advice "to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world," both equipment costs and costs related to the number of personnel would automatically be greatly reduced. For example, the Paul-Frank proposal expects to save only \$147 billion over 10 years from winding down the Afghan and Iraq War troop commitments. But this is only a small part of the savings that could be achieved. President Obama's 2012 budget proposal calls for \$164.5 billion to be spent in 2011 alone for those two wars, which is close to the average annual cost of the wars according to the Congressional Budget Office. The CBO estimated in September 2010 that the total cost of the two wars was more than \$1.1 trillion. Why the huge cost? Because the bullets and bombs that are being exploded during the wars have to be replaced. The cost of purchasing such armaments for the unnecessary Iraq War (or in the case of Afghanistan, the *no longer* necessary war) is wasted. And new bombs must be purchased, often at a cost of millions of dollars per bomb.

U.S. "defense" spending today has all of the trademarks of every other out-of-control big-government program. For example, nobody can say for sure precisely how much the United States spends on defense, and nobody can say for sure how many bases the U.S. government has abroad. Investigative reporter Nick Turse searched official government reports and found that different agencies disagreed with each other over the number. "According to the Department of Defense's 2010 Base Structure Report, the U.S. military now maintains 662 foreign sites in 38 countries around the world," Turse wrote for CBSNews.com on January 10. "Dig into that report more deeply, though, and Grand Canyon-



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sized gaps begin to emerge.” For example, the official roster lists no bases in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, nations that the United States uses as staging areas for its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ditto for Afghanistan, even though it’s known we have more than 400 bases there to wage our war in that troubled nation. Turse eventually concluded that determining the number of U.S. military bases abroad was impossible: “[In] a world where all information is available at the click of a mouse, there’s one number no American knows. Not the president. Not the Pentagon. Not the experts. No one.”

Defense of Defense Spending

Despite the potential savings and regardless of U.S. debt, neoconservatives have led the charge against any defense spending cuts, and reacted angrily to the Paul-Frank proposal. A trifecta of neoconservative dons, Ed Feulner of the Heritage Foundation, Arthur Brooks of the American Enterprise Institute, and William Kristol of the *Weekly Standard*, published an opinion piece in the October 4, 2010 *Wall Street Journal* entitled “Peace Doesn’t Keep Itself,” arguing against Paul and Frank (without naming them): “Military spending is not a net drain on our economy. It is unrealistic to imagine a return to long-term prosperity if we face instability around the globe because of a hollowed-out U.S. military lacking the size and strength to defend American interests around the world.”

The key word in the quote by these three neoconservative giants is “interests.” By American “interests,” they don’t mean merely protecting the property and citizens of the United States. The three neocon dons see a world under U.S. hegemony, a world where America is not one independent nation among many, but rather a nation whose prosperity depends upon constant foreign wars and occupations to defend our limitless “interests.” The U.S. government, in their worldview, is literally the policeman of the world. And in that world, every spot on the globe — no matter how remote from American soil — is a “vital national interest” for Americans at home that must be controlled with a constant outpouring of blood from American servicemen and treasure from American taxpayers. They continue:

Global prosperity requires commerce and trade, and this requires peace. But the peace does not keep itself. The *Global Trends 2025* report, which reflects the consensus of the U.S. intelligence community, anticipates the rise of new powers — some hostile — and projects a demand for continued American military power. Meanwhile we face many nonstate threats such as terrorism, and piracy in sea lanes around the world. Strength, not weakness, brings the true peace dividend in a global economy.

Neoconservatives see a world of vague, frightening “threats” against which Americans can only be protected by increased military spending and more projection of “continued American military power” abroad. The vague threats, from pirates to terrorists to unnamed “hostile” nations that may or may not emerge in the future, sound a lot like the search for a threat as an excuse to continue military spending in the classic 1995 comedy movie *Canadian Bacon*. In the film, the U.S. President (played by Alan Alda) is looking for a threat to keep up arms production after the break-up of the Soviet empire, and asks, “What are we going to do for an enemy now?” After his National Security Council plays a slide show presentation featuring old and deceased international bad guys such as Ayatollah Khomeini, Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh, and Leonid Brezhnev, the President exasperatingly remarks: “These guys are all dead. What, are you working from an old list?” But then he adds: “Is this the best you could come up with? What about, you know, international terrorism?” The President’s Chairman of the Joint Chiefs



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replies: "Well, sir, we are not going to reopen missile factories just to fight some creeps running around in exploding rental cars, are we?"

Of course, this is precisely what happened in the real world, largely because terrorists achieved a lucky strike (for them) on September 11, 2001. In the movie, the President and his sniveling advisor Stu Smiley (played brilliantly by Kevin Pollak) decide to portray Canada as a dire "threat" to the United States, despite the President's misgivings. "The American people, Mr. Smiley," the President argues, "would never, ever buy this." But Smiley simply replies: "Mr. President, the American people will buy whatever we tell them to. You know that."

The fictitious world presented by *Canadian Bacon* is essentially the same pitch being made by neoconservatives today. They contend that even though the United States spends more than the rest of the world on defense combined, we are nevertheless threatened to such an extent that we must not only continue shouldering the mammoth military budget we have now, but must also preemptively intervene in myriad "hot spots" throughout the world. To make the case for global empire, they are selling the line of vague "threats," expecting us to believe whatever scare tactics they employ.

The World's Policeman

But the United States does not really need many (if any) bases abroad to project power; we have 11 U.S. Navy carrier battle groups for that. A single carrier battle group could easily handle any of the "nonstate threats such as terrorism, and piracy" that neoconservative leaders claim to fear. Moreover, a single carrier group could easily reduce any Middle Eastern nation to radioactive trinitite glass with the nuclear weapons in its arsenal if necessary. Even without foreign bases, the United States does not lack power to project overseas when needed.

But carrier groups are inadequate for military occupations of foreign countries or for acting as the global policeman, a role the U.S. military has increasingly played under the neoconservative Bush administrations (father and son) and the leftist/interventionist Clinton and Obama administrations. For example, the United States military established AFRICOM, a military command for Africa (except Egypt) in 2007. According to the first deputy to the commander for military operations, Vice Adm. Robert Moeller (Ret.), the responsibilities of this command "include piracy and illegal trafficking, ethnic tensions, irregular militaries and violent extremist groups, undergoverned regions, and pilferage of resources. This last challenge includes oil theft, as well as widespread illegal fishing that robs the African people of an estimated \$1 billion a year because their coastal patrols lack the capacity to find and interdict suspicious vessels within their territorial waters and economic exclusion zones." In other words, the U.S. military is engaging in Africa as the continental police force. Moeller claims that the United States is keeping a light troop "footprint" in Africa, stressing that headquarters for the command is still based in Germany. But back in 2002 the United States opened up its first major African base in Djibouti, Camp Lemonnier. Moreover, AFRICOM's budget has increased more than 400 percent, up to \$310 million for fiscal year 2009 from just \$75.5 million a year earlier.

Whether the United States should be policeman of the world is what the defense budget battle is all about. The United States has nearly 400,000 military personnel deployed abroad in more than 100 countries as of September 2010, according to Defense Department statistics. The global commitment of the U.S. military has not only engendered a huge financial burden for American taxpayers, and a tremendous strain on military families, it has also created wide anti-American sentiment around the



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world. The U.S. military abroad has sparked anti-military protests by thousands in Okinawa, South Korea, and Italy. Even Osama bin Laden claimed he switched his jihad from fighting the atheistic former Soviet Union to the United States only after the U.S. military established permanent bases in the Islamic holy land of the Arabian peninsula. Unlike carrier battle groups, American military bases on foreign soil create an effect known as “blowback,” generating the same kind of attacks against Americans that they are nominally erected to protect against.

But the neoconservative movement is not satisfied with the United States minding its own business in international affairs, as George Washington advised in his farewell address. “The United States and the world paid a severe price for the ostrich-like behavior too many democratic nations exhibited during the 1920s and 1930s. Reps. Paul and Frank appear determined to repeat this mistake,” Alvin S. Felzenberg and Alexander B. Gray argued in the January 3 edition of the neoconservative *National Review*. Their column entitled “The New Isolationism” revealed their preferred tactic: comparing anyone who wants less defense spending with those who coddled Hitler before World War Two. Neoconservatives today ask the same question as the President in *Canadian Bacon*: “What are we going to do for an enemy now?” And, amusingly enough, they can’t settle on one. There is no Hitler in position today, nor do the *National Review* writers present in their article any but minor (and highly unlikely) threats to U.S. territory that could be handled by a small amount of military power.

Congress needs to find the courage to go beyond the trite neoconservative clichés and actually make cuts in the wasted projection of American military power abroad.



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