

# The Washington Post

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## Why defense spending should be cut

By [Fareed Zakaria](#),

The scary aspect of [the debt deal](#) meant to force all of Washington to its senses is the threatened cut to defense spending. If the congressional “super-committee” cannot agree on cutbacks of \$1.5 trillion, the guillotine will fall and half of those cuts will have to come from expenditures on national security. As with so much Washington accounting, there is lots of ambiguity in baselines and terms (for instance, what is covered under “national security”?). Most experts estimate that the defense budget would lose \$600 billion to \$700 billion over the next 10 years. If so, let the guillotine fall. It would be a much-needed adjustment to an out-of-control military-industrial complex.

First, some history. The Pentagon’s budget has risen for 13 years, which is unprecedented. Between 2001 and 2009, overall spending on defense rose from \$412 billion to \$699 billion, a 70 percent increase, which is larger than in any comparable period since the Korean War. Including the supplementary spending on Iraq and Afghanistan, we spent \$250 billion more than average U.S. defense expenditures during the Cold War — a time when the Soviet, Chinese and Eastern European militaries were arrayed against the United States and its allies. Over the past decade, when we had no serious national adversaries, U.S. defense spending has gone from about a third of total worldwide defense spending to 50 percent. In other words, we spend more on defense than the planet’s remaining countries put together.

It is not unprecedented for defense spending to fall substantially as we scale back or end military actions. After the Korean War, President Dwight Eisenhower cut defense spending 27 percent. Richard Nixon cut it 29 percent after Vietnam. As tensions declined in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan began scaling back his military spending, a process accelerated under Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Given the enormous run-up in spending under George W. Bush, even if President Obama made comparable cuts to that of those presidents today, defense spending would remain substantially above the levels under all those presidents. The Bowles-Simpson commission’s plan proposed [\\$750 billion in defense cuts](#) over 10 years. Lawrence Korb, who worked at the Pentagon for Ronald Reagan, believes that [a \\$1 trillion cut over 10 to 12 years](#) is feasible without compromising national security.

Serious conservatives should examine the defense budget, which contains tons of evidence of liberalism run amok that they usually decry. Most talk of waste, fraud and abuse in government is vastly exaggerated; there simply isn’t enough money in discretionary spending. Most of the federal government’s spending is transfer payments and tax expenditures, which are — whatever their merits

— highly efficient at funneling money to their beneficiaries. The exception is defense, a cradle-to-grave system of housing, subsidies, cost-plus procurement, early retirement and lifetime pension and health-care guarantees. There is so much overlap among the military services, so much duplication and so much waste that no one bothers to defend it anymore. Today, the U.S. defense establishment is the world's largest socialist economy.

Defense budget cuts would also force a healthy rebalancing of American foreign policy. Since the Cold War, Congress has tended to fatten the Pentagon while starving foreign policy agencies. As former defense secretary Robert Gates pointed out, there are more members of military marching bands than make up the entire U.S. foreign service. Anyone who has ever watched American foreign policy on the ground has seen this imbalance play out. Top State Department officials seeking to negotiate vital matters arrive without aides and bedraggled after a 14-hour flight in coach. Their military counterparts whisk in on a fleet of planes, with dozens of aides and pots of money to dispense. The late Richard Holbrooke would laugh when media accounts described him as the “civilian counterpart” to Gen. David Petraeus, then head of U.S. Central Command. “He has many more planes than I have cellphones,” Holbrooke would say (and he had many cellphones).

The result is a warped American foreign policy, ready to conceive of problems in military terms and present a ready military solution. Describing precisely this phenomenon, Eisenhower remarked that to a man with a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. In his often-quoted [farewell address](#), Eisenhower urged a balance between military and non-military spending. Unfortunately, it has become far more unbalanced in the decades since his speech.

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