

Defense

# The Indispensable

The fiscal crisis is rekindling debate about America's out



# le, Unaffordable Nation

sized global presence and the massive defense spending that underwrites it.



■ **By James Kitfield**

Looking back for the high-water mark of the post-9/11 military buildup, historians may one day point to the smudge left by the 2010 summer of America's discontent. For months there have been rumblings of potential backwash as public anger and alarm grow over a steadily mounting, \$13 trillion national debt; unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and U.S. defense spending that approaches that of all other nations combined. With the midterm elections nearing, tea party activists, libertarians, rank-and-file Republicans, and

even some progressives are fighting over deficit reduction. That scrum will inevitably land on the steps of the Pentagon for the same reason Willie Sutton was drawn to banks: because that's where the money is.

Congress has already started to balk at further expanding an annual defense budget that has nearly doubled in size since 2001, and that in inflation-adjusted dollars is at its highest level since World War II. Recently, strange bedfellow Reps. Ron Paul, R-Texas, and Barney Frank, D-Mass., co-authored an article on *The Huffington Post* calling for substantial cuts in defense spending to reduce the deficit. With the cost of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan now at more than \$1 trillion, resistance is also growing to continued spending on those wars. In a July House vote, 102 Democrats and 12 Republicans voted against a \$59 billion supplemental appropriations bill.

■ **GLOBAL SHERIFF: U.S. troops are fighting two wars and conducting training and stability operations in 120 countries.**

Meanwhile, prominent members of President Obama's bipartisan Deficit Reduction Commission from both parties have signaled potential cuts to a defense budget on pace to reach \$708 billion next year. With defense now accounting for 55 percent of all discretionary spending, they could hardly have been expected to suggest otherwise.

"The fiscal crisis is real; it poses serious, long-term threats to America's well-being and global position; and the only solution, as already experienced from 1985 to when we hit a surplus in 1998, is for all parts of federal spending and revenues to be on the table, including defense," Gordon Adams, former associate director for national security and international affairs at the Office of Management and Budget, wrote recently on *National Journal's* website. The entire defense budget today, Adams says, is as large as any of the means-tested entitlement programs.

"Defense Department budget planning has been undisciplined for more than 10 years, leading to massive growth in defense overhead, a uniformed workforce nearly half of which has never deployed, and hardware programs costs that are out of control," wrote Adams, currently a professor of international relations at American University. "Even Secretary [of Defense Robert] Gates realizes that it's time for budgetary restraint and discipline."

To ride out any riptide in government spending, Gates recently detailed a series of cost-cutting measures, including reducing the number of private contractors by 30 percent over the next three years; cutting at least 50 general and flag officer positions and 150 senior civilian executive positions in the next two years; and eliminating a number of major headquarters and commands, most notably the Joint Forces Command in Norfolk, Va.

Those actions come on top of previously announced program cuts and terminations that include ending the Air Force's F-22 fighter and C-17 transport programs; canceling the VH-71 presidential helicopter and the Army's Future Combat System; and forgoing an alternative engine for the multiservice F-35 fighter.

When asked whether those steps were enough to pre-empt cuts in the defense budget, even the Pentagon's chief financial officer sounded guarded.

"We don't know what the Deficit Reduction Commission will propose in terms of the defense budget top line when it reports in December, but if you go back in history all the way to World

War II, in periods of conflict or high threats to U.S. national security there has always been growth in the defense budget," said Defense Department Comptroller Robert Hale, who has argued for a 1 percent budget increase after inflation, plus the costs of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Past growth held true during times of war, during the Reagan defense buildup, and during this period of fighting terrorism," Hale said. "We're still in two wars, winding down one but sustaining the other, so I expect there will still be some modest growth in the defense budget. It will be modest, however, and in order to persuade Congress and the American people to continue supporting us in these really tough economic times, we need to make every dollar count."

### A Debate Rekindled

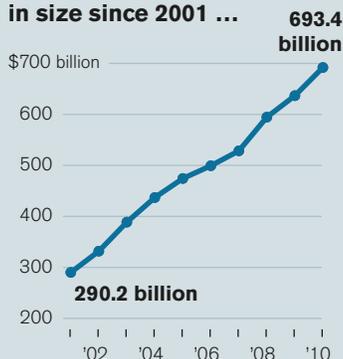
Given the severity of the fiscal crisis and the unpopularity of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Pentagon's relatively modest cost-cutting measures are unlikely to forestall the most serious debate about defense spending that Washington has seen since the post-Cold War 1990s. In that period of defense cuts and "peace dividends," the Clinton administration coined the phrase "indispensable nation" to describe the role of the lone superpower in exporting security and underwriting global stability at a time when U.S. economic and military power were at their peak.

Almost no one predicted, however, how arduous and expensive the global sheriff's role would prove in an increasingly fractious era. In just the past two decades, U.S. military forces have seen combat or crisis deployments in Panama, the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and now Afghanistan and Iraq. On any given day, U.S. troops are conducting training and stability operations in 120 countries.

As the debate rekindles in Washington regarding America's outsized role in the world and the massive defense spending that underwrites it, the strategic environment has changed dramatically from the tech boom and budget surpluses of the 1990s. Today the U.S. economy remains sluggish after the Great Recession and saddled with unsustainable levels of debt. For its part, the U.S. military is showing severe strains from nearly a decade of nonstop fighting, with ballooning personnel costs and an arsenal prematurely battered by constant use.

## ■ Military Spending

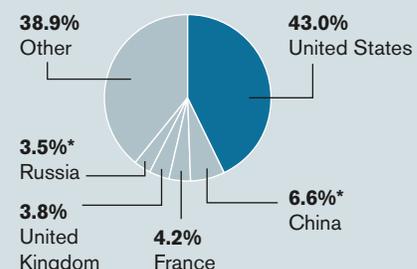
The annual defense budget has doubled in size since 2001 ...



... and now makes up more than half of all discretionary spending ...

Category	Percentage
<b>Defense-Military</b>	<b>55.6%</b>
Health and Human Services	6.7
Veterans Affairs	4.3
Education	3.8
Homeland Security	3.5
Housing and Urban Development	3.5
State	2.3
Agriculture	2.2
Justice	2.2
Energy	2.1

...and makes up almost half of military expenditures worldwide (2009).



\*Estimated

SOURCES: Office of Management and Budget; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's Military Expenditure Database

The economies of close allies in Europe and Asia are similarly weakened, and their defense spending is declining precipitously, so it will be difficult if not impossible to pass more of the burden of policing the global commons to friends. Potential adversaries have taken note, pressing their regional advantages and making the post-9/11 world far less benign than the post-Cold War era that shaped Washington's last great debate about the nation's defense posture.

On its surface, the debate early next year over the fiscal 2012 defense budget will focus on "budget top lines" and "future year defense programs." A number of national security experts believe, however, that the underlying issues and stakes involved are far more profound than just dollars and cents.

"We have squandered literally trillions of dollars, directly and indirectly, on combating modest threats exaggerated by our fears, while our economy has declined steadily to a point where it may no longer be able to support our previous superpower status," Loren Thompson, chief operating officer of the Lexington Institute, a defense consulting firm, wrote recently on *National Journal's* website. At some point, he noted, U.S. political leaders will have to face up to the reality of the country's economic circumstances and the implied limitations. "We can't afford to keep policing a world in which many of our trading partners are growing faster and our military methods are contributing to national bankruptcy. The last thing America needs is a concept of its role in the world that is beyond the capacity of our economy and our political system to sustain, purchased with borrowed dollars that will make the emergence of new 'peer competitors' more likely."

### The Red Team

For an outside-the-box appraisal of the United States' global role and defense posture and the threats to U.S. interests, Congress asked some of the country's pre-eminent national security experts to critique the Defense Department's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review. The QDR Independent Panel follows in the footsteps of President Eisenhower's "Project Solarium" of 1953, which established three competing teams of top military and diplomatic officials to argue different approaches for winning the Cold War. Since then, similar "red teams" have proven critical to developing national strategy by testing status quo doctrine, looking beyond the tyranny of the immediate to threats on the far horizon, and above all, confronting conventional wisdom.

The QDR Independent Panel, co-chaired by former Defense Secretary William Perry and former National Security adviser Stephen Hadley, didn't just challenge the narrative of an overburdened superpower indentured to its global commitments; it turned conventional wisdom on its head. In its recently released final report, "The QDR in Perspective: Meeting America's Needs in the 21st Century," the panel concluded that the U.S. military force structure is not too big but rather too small. Spe-

cifically, it called for a significantly larger fleet of warships and an expanded Air Force with "deep strike" capability primarily to counter the threat posed by a rising China.

Even though the U.S. has ended combat operations in Iraq and plans to begin withdrawing troops from Afghanistan in 2011, the report calls for maintaining the current level of ground forces to finish those jobs and meet future demands for

counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and stability operations. Rather than cutting new weapons programs, the panel argues for a much more rapid modernization of an aging arsenal.

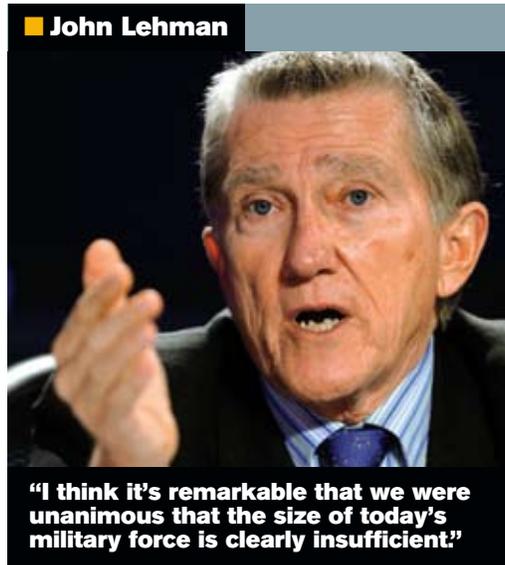
"There is increased operational tempo for a force that is much smaller than it was during the years of the Cold War. In addition, the age of major military systems has increased within all of the services, and that age has been magnified by wear and tear through intensified use," the report notes, before concluding with an explicit warning: "The aging of the inventories and equipment used by all the services, the decline in the size of the Navy, escalating personnel entitlements, overhead and procurement costs, and the growing stress on the force mean that a train wreck is coming in the areas of personnel, acquisition, and force structure...."

The potential consequences for the United States of a 'business as usual' attitude towards the concerns in this report are [thus] not acceptable."

To avoid that train wreck, the panel, which was instructed to focus on strategic requirements rather than budgetary constraints, issued its most counterintuitive recommendation: Rather than cutting the defense budget, the United States should spend significantly more on its military forces. Failure to do so, the panel concludes, "will not make conflicts go away or make America's interests any less important. It will simply lead to an increasingly unstable and unfriendly global climate and, eventually, to conflicts America cannot ignore."

"Secretary Gates's directive on efficiencies to deal with DOD costs is a good start, but in our judgment it will not be sufficient," Perry said in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on August 3. "That is, additional top-line [spending] will be required. What we have described as a need in our report will be expensive. But deferring recapitalization [of the U.S. military] could entail even greater expenses in the long run."

John Lehman, who served as Navy secretary in the Reagan administration, was a panel member. "Since there were 20 people on the commission, Republicans and Democrats, I think it's remarkable that we were unanimous that the size of today's military force is clearly insufficient," he said in an interview. "When I was secretary of the Navy, for instance, we usually had 65 to 75 ships in the Mediterranean as part of the Sixth Fleet. How many ships do you think are currently assigned to the Sixth Fleet in the Med? We're down to zero, and it's been that way for some time. We have too small a blanket in terms of the size of the fleet, and when we pull it to provide a temporary presence in one area, it leaves other important areas uncovered."



When asked how the nation could afford a significantly larger Navy fleet at a time when the economy is buckling under its current burdens and debt load, Lehman pointed out that the panel was not tasked by Congress to consider budgets. “This was not a budget commission, it was a military requirements commission, so the budget is somebody else’s problem,” he said. “What we tried to do was come up with a minimal defense program that, with an acceptable level of risk, can deter catastrophe.”

### Buck Stops Here

Before the national security buck stops at the Oval Office, it passes through the National Security Council, whose problem it is to mount a defense of U.S. interests that the country can afford. In crafting the national security strategy released earlier this year, the NSC explicitly identified the nation’s economy as the “wellspring of American power,” and the council posited reducing the national debt as a strategic imperative. That tracked with comments by Adm. Mike Mullen, the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, who has called the national debt “our biggest national security threat.”

As the White House prepares for the Deficit Reduction Commission’s report in December, Obama has touted the milestone reached on August 31 with the removal of the last combat troops from Iraq, and the administration has stuck to its rhetorical guns by insisting that U.S. troops will begin to withdraw from Afghanistan next July. Close aides say that those deadlines and debt reduction are closely linked in the White House’s thinking.

“President Obama would say that the reason we talk about rebalancing some of the other tools in our toolbox besides the military is because the kind of military engagements we’ve had over the past decade are unsustainable if we’re going to deal with our debt,” Ben Rhodes, the deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, told *National Journal*. Obama’s recent speech to the nation on the end of combat operations in Iraq, he said, was in part to emphasize that Operation Iraqi Freedom’s huge drain on the national treasury is drawing to a close.

“President Obama has also been very clear that part of the reason he identified a narrow timeframe for the ‘surge’ of troops in Afghanistan, with a transition out to begin in July 2011, is because we can’t sustain an open-ended commitment at the level of resources we’re expending in Afghanistan, either,” Rhodes said. The fact that the United States is stretched thin around the world and struggling to afford its frenetic global military operations, he noted, has certainly not been lost on potential adversaries. “Frankly, some of the challenges we face result from the fact that other notable countries have a strategy for not spreading themselves wide, but rather to sit back and let America burn its resources until we are overextended. That is the strategy of some nations.”

### The Bane of Empire

In any discussion of harsh geostrategic realities and the U.S. defense posture, the degree to which the United States remains

bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan while China continues its rapid rise looms large. Emerging powers elbowing their way into the established international order have been a fulcrum of conflict throughout history. The rise and inevitable fall of empires has also been a major force in shifting the tectonic plates of the global order, a disruption often preceded by the traditional bane of empire—arrogance and strategic overextension.

“Buried in the current debate is the assumption that the United States is still the world’s hegemon, duty-bound to be prepared to fight everyone, everywhere if imperial interests require it,” retired Col. W. Patrick Lang, an author and a former senior Defense Department intelligence official, wrote recently on *National Journal*’s *National Security* experts blog. “How can responsible, grown-up people who understand our economic position think that has anything to do with reality?”

From a historical perspective, Lang sees parallels between the United States’ challenges today and the decline of the Roman Empire. “It seems to me that America’s situation today is somewhat like that of the eastern Roman Empire in the time of Justinian: a declining economy; insufficient forces

for the mission of reconquest of Africa and other lost lands; a persistence in pursuing unrealistic goals. All these factors contributed to the long-term decline of the Byzantine state. Let’s not follow that example.”

Richard Hart Sinnreich, a retired Army officer and a consultant to a variety of defense agencies that include the Institute for Defense Analysis and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, also sees historical parallels between the United States today and the British Empire of the late 1800s.

“As a debtor nation with an exploding deficit and little hope in the near term of correcting either condition, we have a special need to reconcile our ambitions with our resources,” he wrote on *National Journal*’s website. During the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th, Sinnreich noted, Great Britain reacted to similar strategic constraints by finding accommodation with its traditional great-power adversaries, abandoning its maritime supremacy in the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific to the United States and Japan, respectively, and reorienting the British army away from imperial policing and toward the threat of a possible continental war against the emerging power Germany.

“Britain made those changes gradually, and in many cases grudgingly, but had it not successfully reconciled its strategic commitments with its resources, today’s Britons probably would be speaking German,” Sinnreich wrote. “We in the United States are not Edwardian Britons, but we suffer from comparable strategic overextension. That doesn’t mean we should abandon old friends or ignore new enemies. I do believe, however, that it’s past time to prioritize both.”

[jkitfield@nationaljournal.com](mailto:jkitfield@nationaljournal.com)

