

Cutting the military

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The sequestration cuts that began to be implemented this month—\$1.1 trillion in federal budget cuts, divided equally between defense and nondefense areas—are like an inkblot test. One group of observers sees the cuts in military spending and worries about a weakened defense; another group sees the reduction in domestic spending and laments the pain that will be felt by the poor and unemployed and the harm done to research and education.

Some progressives, like former Vermont governor Howard Dean, note that defense spending has long been a sacred cow in American politics and think it's worth suffering the cuts in domestic programs to get across-the-board cuts to the military, which accounts for one-fifth of the nation's budget. The 7.9 percent sequester reduction will cause a little pain at the Pentagon. Procurement of weapons systems will be slowed down. Civilian employees of the military will bear the brunt of the cuts—they will have to take off one day per week, without pay, for the last 22 weeks of the year.

But the defense cuts don't go very deep. The United States will still spend as much on defense as the next 13 countries in the world combined. The new, reduced level of military spending will equal what it was in 2006, at the peak of the Iraq War.

The nation still needs a probing debate about the proper role of the military in foreign affairs, national security and financial priorities and the appropriate size of the defense budget. Two decades ago, the end of the cold war momentarily

promised a peace dividend. Two invasions of Iraq, a war in Afghanistan and the so-called war on terror eroded that possibility.

But not every problem in the world demands a military solution. In fact, most require sustained efforts of diplomacy and foreign aid and development. Compared to the size of the defense budget, the State Department is grossly underfunded, as is the U.S. Institute of Peace, which pursues nonviolent means of resolving conflicts.

For reasons of domestic health as well, the U.S. needs to shift spending away from defense toward programs in education, scientific research, green technology, job training and infrastructure. These are the true sources of national strength. Peter Feaver, a political scientist at Duke University, argues that military spending has the capacity “to destroy a state by draining it of resources.”

Some advocates of limited government believe that the federal government has but one task—national security. But as Andrew J. Bacevich points out (in *The New American Militarism*), defense is only one of a number of tasks charged to the federal government. It is time to rebalance national spending so that the nation’s resources are properly devoted to those other crucial tasks—forming a more perfect union, establishing justice, promoting the general welfare and securing the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.