
The 600-pound Gorilla

Why We Need a Smaller Defense Department

*Where does an 800-pound gorilla sit?
Wherever it wants.*

By RYAN P. ALLEN

The largest gorillas found in the wild weigh around 500 pounds, and gorillas living in captivity can weigh over 600 pounds.¹

The 800-pound gorilla of the classic riddle gets whatever it wants by virtue of its exaggerated size. There are no smaller creatures or other large gorillas that could stop it, so it dominates without competition. While the 800-pound gorilla's size is beneficial to him, it is unnecessarily large. The gorilla does

not need that much mass when 700 or even 600 pounds would be enough weight and power to have its way in any situation and sit where it wants. One can say the same for the Department of Defense (DOD). The Department is too large, and a smaller DOD is in the best interest of the United States.

The current DOD is a liability in some respects, which runs counter to the security and stability that U.S. citizens expect. Of course, it provides the necessary national



55th Combat Camera (Richard Norris)

Soldiers provide security during Operation Southern Strike II, Afghanistan

defense, but at its current size, it also comes with unintended effects. Overreliance on military force instead of utilization of other forms of national power is an unintended but natural result of an overly large and extremely capable organization. The DOD budget is too large to remain at its current level, and the amount that the U.S. Government spends on defense is unsustainable if the Nation wishes to regain economic viability. Finally, the excessive size of DOD results in strategic overreach, does not match realistic threat projections, and, ironically, weakens the United States over time.

The United States can reverse these unintended consequences with a sound plan for reduction of DOD manpower and budget. Of course, any reduction must be in harmony with national security, defense, and military strategies to be effective. Military strategy nests in the President's National Security Strategy and the Secretary of Defense's National Defense Strategy. Reduction measures that do not account for elements of these strategies are ill-advised and reckless. Therefore, sound military strategy that addresses current and future threats must be the starting point.² With a National Military Strategy that addresses these threats, and a realistic approach toward what it will take to safeguard the Nation in light of these threats, the United States can maintain a military that allows for the use of other forms of power, is economically sustainable, and does not encourage overreach.

Overemphasis on Military

There are many ways to organize and distinguish forms of national power. One common organization is its division into four categories: diplomatic, informational, military, and economic. Naturally, nations most often use those elements of national power best suited to their strengths and their cultural and traditional norms. The way different forms of national power are used forms an identity for each nation in the international community. This combination shifts over time as national interests evolve, the nation's strengths and weaknesses change, and the social and political climates in a nation or region transform.

DOD carries out the mission of national defense today but does not neces-

sarily exercise military power consistent with the idea of national defense as held by many citizens. Samuel Huntington wrote about the gap between American ideals and the institutional practice of those ideals by government. Huntington suggested that throughout the political and governmental processes, American institutions are inconsistent in practice with the people's ideas.³ In the defense environment, one can see this in the form of defense commitments that are not essential to the defense of the Nation. Rather than using military force to defend vital security interests, the U.S. Government often uses it electively in support of lesser interests. Washington conducted military operations in Bosnia, Iraq, and Libya with tenuous connections to actual defense of the United States.⁴ The use of military power in areas that may be better suited to other forms of power unnecessarily raises the stakes in the international community.

The use of U.S. military power often comes with media and popular discussions, domestically and abroad, of national sovereignty and legitimacy. The use of diplomatic, economic, and informational forms

The idea of legitimacy naturally arises during discussions of national sovereignty. Although legitimacy in the eyes of the world is something most governments desire, it has not proven to be a roadblock to military action. Although not required, internationally perceived legitimacy does have its place in planning for military action. Embarking only upon "just" military actions that are perceived as legitimate by the world at large helps provide balance and stability to international relations. Nations that upset this international balance through unaccepted military use degrade that international system, no matter how powerful the acting nation may be. Political scientist Andrew Hurrell writes that legitimacy in this context is "the existence of an international order reflecting unequal power and involving the use of coercive force that creates the need for legitimization in the first place," and it is "as much a part of the messy world of politics as of the idealized world of legal or moral debate."⁸ An overreliance on the military aspect of national power tends to erode this international system, which is a stabilizing force in most cases. Military force is only one instrument of power and its overuse comes at

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of power rarely triggers such discussions. *Sovereignty* is a term without a concrete, globally accepted definition, but for most it generally means the right and responsibility of a nation's government to govern within its borders without external infringement.⁵ While many people around the world share this concept, historically a realistic if somewhat Hobbesian view is that a nation is only as sovereign as stronger nations or groups of nations allow.⁶ Sovereignty of weaker nations may or may not be important to stronger nations based on current events and circumstances, and has not been a fixed principle throughout American history.⁷ This cynical but realistic view of sovereignty does not mean, however, that it is in the interest of stronger nations to violate the sovereignty of weaker nations.

the expense of the nation as a whole, weakening the potential impact of the other forms of power.⁹

Diplomatic relations guarantee little, as they rely on relationships in which both nations tend to vie for their own interests. The result of the bargaining is likely a combination of the two interests, a compromise that is not what either nation desires in total but is more palatable than the alternatives.¹⁰ Members of powerful governments, or the citizens of those nations, often take exception to this uncertainty. Militarily powerful nations may be tempted to use force to get exactly what they want rather than having to accept the compromise of diplomacy. This assumes, however, that force gives a more predictable and intended outcome, which history shows to be untrue. The cumulative result of the use of force wears on a nation's credibility in the international scene, and ultimately weakens future attempts at applying diplomatic power.

Major Ryan P. Allen, USMC, is with Marine Air Control Group-18, Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, Okinawa, Japan; he wrote this article while a student at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College.

In U.S. history, we can see the ebb and flow in favor of diplomatic versus military forms of national power. Individual personalities, external threats, and other factors have combined, resulting in administrations and leaders who have tended toward either diplomacy or military force. Diplomacy in the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union was unique, at times nonexistent, and usually combined heavily with military posturing.¹¹ Indeed, the very appointment of some personalities, such as John Foster Dulles in the Eisenhower administration, ensured that diplomacy with the Soviets was not an option.¹² Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the United States cut the State Department budget by 20 percent, resulting in the closure of over 30 Embassies and consulates and elimination of 22 percent of the department's employees.¹³ The cuts in the State Department resulted in increased

security threats, and only after all other implementations of national power are exhausted.

Economic Impact of an Oversized DOD

The U.S. economy is staggering in scale and complexity. In 2011, total Federal revenue was \$2.2 trillion, and Federal spending was \$3.8 trillion. It does not take an economist to see that in 2011 the United States ran a deficit; it spent (outlays) more money than it took in (receipts), and it has done that every year since 2001. Annual deficits, which in turn add to the total national debt, have been the norm since World War II. In the past 5 years, the United States amassed about one-third (\$4.6 trillion) of the current total national deficit (\$16 trillion).¹⁶ Economists expect that after 2015, national debt will outpace gross domestic product (GDP) growth, resulting in the reduced possibility of being able to “grow

through a combination of tax increases, cuts in domestic program spending, and borrowing.²² The past decade has seen quite a different approach to paying for defense and war. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan mark the first time in U.S. history that the government cut taxes and did not cut nondefense spending while engaged in major wars.²³ Seemingly, the United States and its citizens are having their cake and eating it, too. It should come as no surprise that fighting wars costs money, a dilemma that typically triggers the so-called guns-versus-butter debate. The U.S. Government seemingly avoided this controversy in America's most recent wars, but the short-term avoidance comes with a long-term cost.

Political scientist Alex Mintz correctly concludes that there has not been a “defense-welfare tradeoff” in post-World War II America.²⁴ Increased defense spending does not result in reduced domestic programs—it results in debt. Until recently, the government offset this increase in defense spending with revenue increases (bonds and/or taxes). A dangerous reality now faces Americans who are willing to look at the numbers: guns and butter and reduced revenue equal mountains of debt. How did the United States arrive at this point? A large part of the answer is that there is simply too much money involved in defense and too much influence over a Congress that naturally seeks constituent approval. The power of the purse held by Congress necessitates close ties with the defense industry where the appropriated money is spent. President Dwight Eisenhower publicly warned of the dangers of what has become widely known as the military-industrial complex. Privately though, and with more accuracy, Eisenhower included the Congress and labeled the relationship the “delta of power.”²⁵

The delta of power more accurately describes a tripartite relationship where one party allocates the money, one party spends the money, and one party receives the money. Congress does not always allot money based on a threat, as many Members of Congress see military programs for the benefit they provide to their constituents in the form of jobs and state revenue. The defense those programs provide is nearly an afterthought. Every year, the DOD budget contains unrequested funds for programs that mean jobs and happy constituents for Congress and industry, but not necessarily military utility. For example, the 1996 Defense Authorization Bill contained \$8

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operations for the Defense Department, and the missions were not always a good match.

The Defense Department chafed as the Clinton administration grew accustomed to using it to cover the types of missions that could have been better addressed through diplomacy. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell was seen as “obstructive” by the Clinton administration officials who wished to resolve the situation in Bosnia with military force.¹⁴ The situation resulted in the famous statement from Secretary of State Madeleine Albright: “What are you saving this superb military for . . . if we can't use it?”¹⁵ This civilian tendency to use military force either without clear political goals or as a substitute for other implements of national power, which was embraced by both political parties, demonstrates the danger of maintaining an oversized military force. As long as there is a force large and capable enough at the disposal of the Government, there will be a temptation and tendency to use that force as a quick problem solver to get the desired outcome without the perceived uncertainty or compromise of diplomacy. To resolve this issue, it is imperative that the United States maintain a DOD sized and structured to respond only to true national

out of debt.¹⁷ There is no doubt that these trends over the past decade are hazardous and unsustainable, and we cannot attribute the source of the deficits to one area alone. While defense spending is not the only large budget category for the United States, it is one of the consistently largest areas of spending.¹⁸

Defense amounts to 17 percent of Federal spending in the President's 2013 budget proposal.¹⁹ The size of annual defense expenditures, to which the U.S. people have grown accustomed for the most part, are typically presented in such a way as to under-emphasize the actual dollars being spent. For example, citing defense expenditures as a percentage of GDP is misleading in its own right. Americans would not think twice about paying 4 cents out of every dollar (as a percentage of GDP) for their security.²⁰ Conversely, if Americans knew that 17 cents out of every dollar the government spends went to DOD, or 32 cents out of every dollar received in taxes, the reaction could be quite different.²¹

Americans must realize that too much defense, more specifically the money it costs to provide that much capability, is nearly as hazardous to a nation in the long term as having too small a defense capability. Historically, the United States pays for its wars

billion in unrequested spending, 80 percent of which went to states with lawmakers sitting on the Armed Services and National Security committees or the Appropriations Defense subcommittees.²⁶ The purpose of spending this unrequested money is not for defense; it is to bring money and jobs to home districts and constituents. Money spent on defense should be for just that, defense, not for a stimulus for congressional district economies.²⁷ America is paying an unnecessarily large sum for defense, due in part to Congress's incentive to funnel defense dollars and jobs home to their districts—but what is the solution?

The American military is the most effective and capable in the world, but it is not worth the increasing amount it costs. Manpower expenses alone are growing at a rapid rate. The annual cost for pay and training of an Active-duty Soldier rose from \$75,000 in 2001 to \$120,000 in 2006, excluding indirect costs such as family housing.²⁸ The United States pays too much for too much defense capability and could spend significantly less and defend itself nearly as well. Politicians propose defense spending reductions with great trepidation if they are bold enough to propose them at all. A recent speech by President Barack Obama, for example, calls on Americans to understand that “we can keep our military strong and our nation secure with a defense budget that continues to be larger than roughly the next ten countries combined.”²⁹ This is a clear demonstration of an inferiority complex thrust on the American people by Congress, DOD, and the defense industry: a call for ever-increasing defense spending based more on economic and political desires than on real-world threats to national security.

The Resulting Weakening of the United States

On the surface, it is counterintuitive to propose that a strong and large DOD will weaken the United States over time. To militarists, hegemonists, and the defense industry, the military cannot be strong enough. In their view, there will always be critical threats to national security that are on the verge of destroying the United States. The Nation does indeed face threats and that will continue, but this does not mean that it structures its defense apparatus appropriately to counter those threats. The current size and structure of the U.S. military is ill-suited to address challenges the United States has faced in the past 10 years

and may face in the near future. Today's DOD structure remains based on Cold War requirements and threats. That basic structure drives policy and political strategy, causing overreach and eventually resulting in a weaker United States. We must examine realistic current and future threats to arrive at a proper match of defense capabilities and resources.

We can organize current and near-term threats to the United States into two general categories: threats from nonstate groups and those from competitor nation-states. The former became a very real issue for the United States on 9/11. Since those attacks, the United States has been fighting nonstate groups around the globe, but from a military standpoint primarily in Iraq and Afghanistan. The latter threat, of competitor nation-states, has always been a factor in national security and always will be. The complex and important questions relating to nation-state threats

this threat, we must ask what role DOD is expected to play against that threat. Indeed, that task falls not only on DOD but also on the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies. The Defense Department may have a role in reaction to a terrorist attack depending on the attack's scale and origin, and would certainly have a role in preventing some types of actions originating outside of U.S. borders. However, current DOD organization and structure would be of little use in directly preventing another 9/11-type attack. If we accept this logic, the only choices are to change the Department to provide this defense or to expect that defense to come from other departments and agencies. If DOD should not be organized and tasked to prevent such an attack, we must then look at what reaction the Department could have to such an attack as part of the defense strategy.

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remain: how much of a threat do certain countries pose, and how will that threat manifest itself? These threat groups must be the starting point in determining defense posture and organization.

Nonstate groups such as al Qaeda have used terrorism and irregular tactics against larger and more powerful entities such as the United States. Understandably frustrating to many Americans, it is the natural tactical choice for nonstate groups, who wisely do not wish to fight U.S. strengths. Competitor nation-states pose a different challenge. Nation-states may engage in acts as benign as economic competition and as malicious as full-scale conventional war or any point in between. Historically, Americans worry most about this conventional threat when thinking about national defense. The U.S. defense industry has long been postured to battle rival conventional forces, and parting from that mindset proves difficult. Rather than deriving defense strategy and structure based on threats to U.S. national security, strategy is in danger of being constructed based on current organization and capabilities.³⁰

It is likely that nonstate groups will attack the United States again. To address

The U.S. reaction to the 9/11 attacks was primarily military. Examining this reaction is important in determining if the military is a good choice for terrorist attack response. Whether the U.S. Government expected it or not, the response to the 9/11 attacks continues to this day. Depending on whether we include Operation *Iraqi Freedom* in that response, the 9/11 attacks resulted in 19 years (nearly 9 in Iraq and over 10 in Afghanistan) of military action for DOD. The United States does not have the money or national will for that type of response to become the norm.³¹ If adversaries see that scale of response as a prediction of future U.S. strategy, nonstate and state actors alike will choose that tactic and watch the United States fall on the sword of overreach. In this respect, the war on terror serves as an opportunity for rival states such as China and Iran.³²

Many envision conflict with competitor nation-states in terms of head-to-head conventional military action and speculate that China is a potential foe. The U.S. Government must shape defense strategy; therefore, it must organize and size its forces around this type of threat. In doing so, it must avoid the conventional approach in favor of a realistic look at how such a conflict would

occur. Economic competition and occasional disputes between Beijing and Washington are much more likely than conventional war.³³ A strategy of proxy war and enticement will probably remain more appropriate in dealing with competitor nations such as China.³⁴ Thus, the United States must carefully measure potential military involvement in such conflicts and decide whether it is necessary to maintain a 1.4 million-strong standing force to address such threats.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has used its military might in conflicts that are arguably not strictly national defense missions. Militarists advocate the use of force to influence and shape the world in terms of U.S. interests, which is starkly different than use of force for national defense.³⁵ The American public will generally embrace the use of the military for those situations that are genuinely national defense, while its use to further other interests is far more difficult to justify.³⁶ Superpowers usually do not fight small wars to defend themselves but rather to establish stability or exert control.³⁷ The United States must carefully weigh which situations constitute a genuine threat and which merely influence U.S. interests. The lack of discrimination between the two results in military overreach.³⁸

Recommended Future for DOD

The current defense approach results in overuse at the expense of other forms of national power, costs too much, and results in strategic overreach. To remedy this, Washington must change why and how it uses DOD and change its size and composition as well. The appropriate starting point must be a top-down review of the U.S. strategic framework.³⁹ P.H. Liotta and Richmond Lloyd recommend beginning the strategic framework review with a series of questions: What do we want to do? How do we plan to do it? What are we up against? What is available to do it? What are the mismatches? Most importantly we must ask, “Why do we want to do this?”⁴⁰ The answer to that question matters. Aggressively promoting American ideals and democratic systems of government, even without military force, can create animosity and spark the kinds of conflict the United States seeks to avoid in the first place.⁴¹ This dynamic is exacerbated by the type of constant military activity seen following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.⁴² It is noteworthy that the first questions Liotta and Lloyd ask are not the ones asked in practice, which often start with, “What are we up against?”

We can find myriad answers concerning what the United States is up against.

Officially, according to the 2011 National Military Strategy, we face an “evolution to a ‘multi-nodal’ world characterized by more shifting, interest-driven coalitions based on diplomatic, military, and economic power, than by a rigid competition between opposing blocs.”⁴³ The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) describes the current and near-future defense environment by stating, “not since the fall of the Soviet Union or the end of World War II has the international terrain been affected by . . . the rise of new powers, the growing influence of nonstate actors, the spread of weapons of mass destruction and other destructive enabling technologies.”⁴⁴ The same document details the force required to meet these “far-reaching and consequential shifts” but does not recommend significant change to current force structure.⁴⁵ The congressionally mandated independent QDR review panel report notes that QDR reports have “become a mirror of the current budget process rather than a strategic guide to the future that drives the budget process.”⁴⁶

Finding a solution to the economic aspect of decreasing the size of DOD is challenging but achievable. It is rational for Members of Congress to seek and pass legislation bringing defense dollars to their districts. The reward is reelection, and there is no penalty for that at present. Detailed congressional reform is beyond the scope of this article, but a simple solution exists. Eliminating unrequested money in the defense budget is a start, but overall budget cutting is required as well. Congress could model future defense budget reduction on the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) program. BRAC legislation was designed to “give top cover and distance to politicians . . . who might otherwise want to do the right thing” but seek to avoid the blame and political fallout.⁴⁷ Eliminating the political disincentive associated with defense cuts makes room for real change. One must recognize the fact that more money involved in defense spending means more incentive to take advantage of the system. Extra defense dollars result in extra corruption.

To be sure, a reduction in the size of DOD in terms of manpower is a contentious issue. Many analysts use the size of a nation’s military synonymously with its capability. Political scientist Peter Feaver warns, “It serves no purpose to establish a protection force and then to vitiate it to the point where it can no longer protect. Indeed,



DOD (Erin A. Kirk-Cuomo)

Chairman takes questions during testimony before Senate Armed Services Committee

an inadequate military institution may be worse than none at all.⁴⁸ Feaver is correct, but many analysts today incorrectly surmise that defense reduction equals “vitiating.” Arbitrary, across-the-board cuts in DOD are unwise; what they may give in “fairness” to all branches and programs they may cost in real capability and result in a truly hollow force.⁴⁹ The threat of a hollow force is usually one of the first terms encountered in the examination of manpower reduction, but this need not be true.

DOD can retain capability while reducing personnel if the Department approaches the task correctly. To avoid the hollow force phenomenon, DOD must eliminate redundant capabilities such as multiple units that perform the same mission, while retaining effectiveness within that capability. For example, a nation may require multiple armored divisions to engage in multiple, simultaneous conventional wars. While the capability requirement is legitimate, the amount of that capability is in question, and the nation could reduce the amount of capability without eliminating the capability as a whole. We can also see the benefit to this approach in manpower versus procurement costs. A smaller manpower force saves money. That savings is vital to research and development as well as maintenance of capability.⁵⁰ With capability safely maintained, the Services can add manpower if the defense situation requires it. History indicates, and future circumstances will reinforce, that the need for rapidly deployable ground forces is a constant.⁵¹ The size of this force is debatable but its necessity is not. U.S. Government leadership, civilian and military, must constantly revisit the requirement for each defense capability.

A smaller force is not necessarily a “hollow force.” Recent research indicates that nearly all of the contributing factors leading to the post-Vietnam hollow force do not exist today.⁵² U.S. leaders can avoid creating a hollow force if they properly address the current situation within a sound strategic framework. In fact, a smaller force may be what is required to remain a functional and effective force at all.⁵³ U.S. Government civilian and military leadership must take great care in defense reductions, as those reductions will influence national security decades into the future. Reductions in manpower and budget can result in a honed military force that, while less capable

in a Cold War–style massive conventional war, is more aligned with current and future security threats without wholesale loss of capability.

Conclusion

Historian and strategist Eliot Cohen notes that “inertia overwhelms the impulse to change at the Pentagon,” and “the military will resist transformation.” But the current situation calls for change nonetheless.⁵⁴ The United States relies on military force, or the threat of force, because that is its strength. It is natural for a nation to play to its strengths in international relations, but it must do so with caution, and it must conduct an honest assessment of the results of the maintenance and use of that strength. U.S. policy currently relies too much on the military instrument of national power at the expense of the other instruments, and that appears likely to continue for the foreseeable future. This overreliance is a direct and natural result of an inflated DOD, and it weakens the U.S. position in the international community. Defense spending levels

arbitrary, across-the-board cuts in DOD are unwise; what they may give in “fairness” to all branches and programs they may cost in real capability

of the past decade are unsustainable, and they unnecessarily create vulnerabilities. Finally, the colossal size of DOD results in the use of military power without great hardship on the American people, thereby resulting in overuse and strategic overreach. These aspects of today’s DOD indicate a need to reduce its size in budget and manpower in the interest of maintaining the U.S. position in the 21st century.

The United States should continue to maintain the strongest and most capable military in the world. This article is not a call for world peace, and it does not aim to weaken security to pander to world community activists. Furthermore, the United States cannot reduce DOD to a weakened point and rely on the good will and humanity of its competitors to act peacefully. The strongest approach for the future of DOD is to trim its size, creating a force that while smaller than the Cold War force remains the most capable in the world and one able to respond to realistic threats to national security. **JFQ**

NOTES

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