In late September while Congress debated the $700 billion bailout of America's financial system, Defense Secretary Robert Gates stood before an audience at the National Defense University and asserted that the Pentagon was having a hard time living within its $500 billion baseline budget. "Yes," he added, "it is sign I've been at the Pentagon for too long to say that with a straight face."

Certainly a half-trillion dollars is a vast sum. And Secretary Gates is right to worry that in hard economic times increases to his budget will appear less than reasonable.

There is nothing about the absolute size of a half-trillion dollar Pentagon budget that should concern Americans if that expenditure is necessary for the defense of the nation and if, as a nation, we are rich enough to foot the bill. In the shadow of the 9/11 attacks and subsequent wars, the Pentagon budget has been exempted from the type of scrutiny it received during the 1990s. But it constitutes so much of our discretionary spending and has contributed so much to our deficit spending that we can no longer afford to look the other way.

The last ten years have seen the Pentagon's "baseline budget" grow by 45% - from $358 billion in 1997 to $518 billion today - a $160 billion boost, not including much of the funding for current wars and new expenditures for Homeland Security. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that Pentagon planning will likely require the baseline budget to grow another $30 billion in coming years. And it has been reported that the Bush administration has passed on to the Obama administration a revised five year defense plan which will push the baseline budget up another $80 billion to $600 billion.

Today, America faces a number of critical challenges. Our national security needs are real and enduring. There also is an immediate need to shore-up our economy and speed relief to Americans facing hard times. Looking to the future, a wave of retirement is approaching and with it, burgeoning social security and Medicare needs. Americans of all ages want reform of the healthcare system in order to improve access to quality care and make it more affordable. We need diverse educational investments and major investments to reduce energy dependency and curb global warming.

Meanwhile America is slipping further into recession, likely to be the worst since the 1930s. The next several years are expected to add several trillions of dollars to our already outstanding national debt of $10 trillion. As debt rises relative to revenue and new demands on the budget loom, we simply must use our resources judiciously. With millions of American households facing their own budget crises, the next congress will be expected to exercise more vigilant oversight of the government budget, the Pentagon's included.

Since 1998 we have spent about $5 trillion on defense (in 2008 dollars), $1.4 trillion more than we would have spent had we remained at the 1998 baseline. About $800 billion (57%) of this increase was devoted to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Resolution of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan would dramatically reduce the demands on the Pentagon budget. The remaining $600 billion (43%) are additions to baseline spending. There is much in baseline spending that deserves closer scrutiny.
We are currently adding nearly 100,000 troops to the Army and Marine Corps. These two services have suffered excessive strain in recent years due to the long occupation of Iraq. But the increase is designed to be permanent. And this part of the plan begs fundamental questions: What have we learned from our Iraq experience? Is long-term, large-scale military occupation of a foreign country a worthwhile or even practical road to greater security? If not, why buy a permanent capability to do it again?

Apart from our current wars, the United States maintains a very large military presence abroad. Even in peacetime we keep more than 200,000 personnel on foreign soil and 30,000 sailors on more than 100 deployed ships and submarines. No other nation does remotely as much. And we are planning to do more - with the recent addition of a new regional military command covering Africa. Some of this serves to deter specific foes, but most serves a vague goal of "environment shaping." Is this the best, most cost-effective way to influence world events? Or might more be done at less cost and more effectively through the State Department and through regional and global institutions?

Finally, the Pentagon hopes to renovate US nuclear capabilities, proceed with national missile defense efforts, and explore the potentials of anti-satellite and space-based weapons. But these efforts are plagued by questions about their effects on international stability and on arms control, and about their feasibility and reliability. In the case of nuclear weapons, perhaps the best course is to retire much of our stockpile in tandem with reductions by other nuclear powers.

Any adjustment in national security planning is bound to be controversial - and it should be. But we can no longer afford to shy away from that controversy. Our current circumstance demands that we enter into a broad and deep discussion about national strategic priorities, including security priorities. And this necessarily entails looking behind the curtain that shields the defense budget from more serious scrutiny.

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