

Obama: A hawk?

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Anyone who was hoping the current administration would bring a modest downsizing of the nation's defense establishment and global military role has to be feeling like [Bernard Madoff](#)'s investors. Escalation is under way in [Afghanistan](#), [the Army](#) is expanding, and the Pentagon is on the all-you-can-eat diet.

The American political system is set up to persuade citizens that they must choose between starkly different policies. In reality, campaigns are mostly a showy exercise in what Sigmund Freud called the "narcissism of small differences."

When it comes to defense, history suggests that the two major parties offer a choice on the order of [McDonald's](#) and [Burger King](#). Anyone looking back 50 years from now at objective indicators would have trouble identifying a meaningful difference between the current president and the last one.

For that matter, it's easy to assume that when [President Barack Obama](#) began addressing national security policy, he accidentally picked up [John McCain](#)'s platform instead of his own. Critics suspect Obama is a closet Muslim. But maybe his real secret is that he's a closet Republican.

The administration and its opponents both make much of its plan to withdraw all U.S. combat forces from Iraq by this summer and to pull the rest out by 2012. What both prefer to forget is that the previous president agreed to the same timetable. Obama's policy on the war he once opposed is not similar to Bush's: It is identical.

Afghanistan? [Dick Cheney](#) faults the president for allegedly failing to "talk about how we win," as if Obama were doing far less than the Bush administration. In fact, Obama has agreed to more than triple the U.S. troop presence in a war that his predecessor only talked about winning. McCain called for a "surge" in Afghanistan like the one in Iraq. Obama has given it to him.

[Republicans](#) nonetheless entertain the fantasy that at heart, Obama is a pacifist, bent on gutting our military might and naively trusting the good faith of our adversaries. Bush [White House](#) adviser [Karl Rove](#) recently complained that under this administration, "defense spending is being flattened: Between 2009 and 2010, military outlays will rise 3.6 percent while nondefense discretionary spending climbs 12 percent."

Read that again: Rove believes that when defense spending rises 3.6 percent, it's not really rising. Why? Because the rest of the budget is growing faster. By that logic, if I gained 10 pounds over the holidays but Rove gained 20, I'd need to have my pants taken in.

As it is, the United States spends more on defense than all the other countries on Earth combined. Yet we persist in thinking of ourselves as endangered by foreign countries that are military pipsqueaks.

Obama shares this view. He thinks the only problem with the American military is there isn't enough of it. He's expanding the size of both the Army and the Marine Corps. That's right: After we begin leaving Iraq, the biggest military undertaking in two decades, we won't need a smaller force. We'll need a bigger one.

Conservative talk-show host [Sean Hannity](#) accuses the president of "cutting back on defense," but he must be holding his chart upside down. The basic Pentagon budget (excluding money for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars) is scheduled to go up every year.

Over the next five years, defense spending, adjusted for inflation, would be higher than it was in the last five years, when Fox News commentators did not complain about inadequate funding. That's not counting the increases requested by Defense Secretary [Robert Gates](#) to provide an additional boost of nearly \$60 billion over those five years.

What all this suggests is that Iraq and Afghanistan have taught us nothing about the folly of invading other countries and trying to turn them into modern democracies. The essential theme of the administration's national security policy is reflexive continuity. Why else would we need a bigger military except to do more of the same?

So we are stuck with the consensus that has ruled [Washington](#) for decades — the expensive, aggressive policy that has inflated the federal budget and bogged us down in two unsuccessful wars while furnishing an endless, priceless recruiting message for Islamic terrorists.

Too bad. None of this would have happened if Barack Obama had been elected.

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