

Spiralling Defense Spending: Public Says Cut Pentagon, Obama Says Increase It

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Did you know that the U.S. public wants military spending cut? Did you know that President Barack Obama wants to increase it for his third year in a row? Actually I already know that most of you didn't know either of these things.

A [poll](#) released on Tuesday and in line with other polling over the years asked: "To ensure its safety, should the United States always spend at least three times as much on defense as any other nation?" This question mislabels the military "defense," which most of it isn't, and claims the interest of "safety," albeit in the context of other questions about spending money, and yet only 25% of voters said yes, while 40% said no and 35% were not sure.

In reality, the United States could cut its military budget (just the Department of so-called Defense, not counting the hundreds of billions spent through other departments) by 85% and still easily be the most expensive military on the planet. Taking the DOD down to merely three times the expense of China's military (the world's next largest) would mean cutting it by 55%. Taking it down to twice China's military would mean cutting it by 70%.

The same poll asked "Does the United States spend too much on the military and national security, not enough, or about the right amount?" If respondents had been informed of what the United States spends, then something smaller than 25% of them should have answered "not enough" and "just right" combined. Instead, 27% said "not enough" and 37% said "just right" while only 32% said too much. Despite 35% saying they were not sure on the other question, and nearly everyone not knowing what they were talking about, respondents all had an opinion on this one, and most of them were wrong by their own measure.

When a pollster tells Americans the facts and then asks for opinions, the [results](#) are predictably different. When told how much money goes where in the federal budget, 65% of Americans want the military cut. But only a small minority of Americans is aware of that.

And anyone paying attention at all almost certainly believes that President Obama is cutting the military. When he has increased it in the past, the [media](#) has made so much noise about particular weapons being cut, that nobody's noticed the overall increase. In Obama's 2011 State of the Union address he claimed:

"The Secretary of Defense has also agreed to cut tens of billions of dollars in spending that he and his generals believe our military can do without."

The English language is flexible enough to avoid calling this a lie if we want to avoid that. But consider these facts. Obama is not here talking about the 2012 fiscal year budget which

he is about to propose and for which he will propose a larger military than ever. Instead he is talking about future years, years the budgets for which will not actually be set until they arrive — at which point it's anybody's guess whether the "cuts" will be made. I put "cuts" in quotation marks because of this other key fact: Obama is not here talking about reducing the military budget even in future years, but rather about scaling back the military's dreams for much larger budgets. That is to say, even with these "cuts" (of \$78 billion over 5 years, as proposed by Secretary Gates) the Pentagon budget will still be increasing beyond the rate of inflation. The cuts are not being imagined as made to the current budget level. Instead what's being cut are the projected budgets for future years as dreamed up by the military.

Thus is an increasing budget referred to as having been cut. The Project on Defense Alternatives has explained this trickery [here](#), as has the National Priorities Project [here](#), not to mention Reuters [here](#). And yet, when I bring this up, people complain to me that Obama promised to cut the military and use the money for good things — they heard it themselves on television.

Now, the unusual thing is that everybody in Washington (other than most Congress members or presidents) is indeed talking about cutting the military. A task force convened by Congressman Barney Frank has [proposed](#) cutting \$1 trillion over 10 years. The chairs of the President's deficit commission [have proposed](#) cutting \$100 billion while Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky [says](#) \$110 billion, and CATO [proposes](#) \$150 billion. The American Conservative Union (CPAC) has two sessions on cutting the military planned for its upcoming [convention](#).

But Obama proposed, in that same State of the Union speech, to freeze spending on everything other than wars and the military. Contrary to myth, Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid are not part of the federal budget. They are separate programs that fund themselves just fine, thank you. The money in Social Security is loaned to the government and owed back to the people with interest. Politicians have no business touching it. If it starts to run short, that can easily be fixed by asking those with large incomes to pay in at the same rate as those with small incomes. The actual budget funded by our income taxes is dominated by the military. When all types of military and war spending are added up, they amount to more than half of the budget. So, the proposed five-year freeze applies only to a minority of the budget, just about all of which has a superior impact on the U.S. economy to military spending.

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