

U.S. MILITARY SPENDING: Hundreds of Billions for Foreign Wars, How Much for National Defense?

Randall Forsberg and Alex Carlin, Authors

Global Action Statement

The piece referenced above is based entirely on a 1999 article (unpublished) prepared by the late Randall Forsberg and Alex Carlin, which makes important statements about US military spending priorities and their impact on both global security and domestic prosperity that only now are beginning to be taken seriously by policymakers and government officials.

The central contention of Forsberg and Carlin - that a shockingly small percentage of our military budget is maintained for the actual defense of national territory - is as compelling in this era of controversial military adventures conducted in response to global 'terrorism' as it was over ten years ago. Indeed, the case could be made that their central thesis is even more relevant today given that requests and appropriations for US defense operations keep getting larger. Currently, the US spends well over half a trillion dollars per year on military programs, hardware and facilities, most of which is simply not necessary for homeland defense.

We at Global Action to Prevent War (GAPW), which was co-founded in 1999 by Randall Forsberg, have welcomed the renewed interest in reducing military spending by the Obama Administration's Commission on Fiscal Responsibility, the Sustainable Defense Task Force launched by Barney Frank, and key think tanks such as the Center for American Progress and the Project on Defense Alternatives -- all of which have identified the need for deficit-reducing cutbacks in military appropriations that have been both obvious and neglected for too long.

We also acknowledge, with gratitude, recent publications on military spending such as *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* by Andrew Bacevich (2010). The book sets out what he calls the 'national wallpaper' of defense spending that has become so familiar we hardly even notice it. That 'wallpaper' is characterized by commitments, albeit dubious ones, to a global military presence, global power projection, and a policy of global intervention. All three of these troubling assertions contribute to military expenditures that, to echo Forsberg and Carlin, are staggeringly greater than what is needed for legitimate national defense.

However, much recent scrutiny of our military spending is still based on assumptions that, as Forsberg and Carlin have been suggesting for some time, do not dig deeply enough. Assessing factors such as 'unreliable or unproven technologies,' missions that demonstrate 'poor cost-benefit' payoff, inefficient management strategies and assets and capabilities that are 'mismatched' to

current military challenges can lead -- as noted by the Sustainable Defense Task Force (*Debt, Deficits and Defense: A Way Forward, 2010*) - to substantial and welcome cost savings. Nonetheless, the consequences of such an assessment -- canceling high end weapons systems, decommissioning naval craft, redeploying personnel and the like -- are not sufficient to deliver the kind of savings which are both militarily feasible and badly needed if we are to rebuild our nation's threatened economy and infrastructure, and engage in a robust response to global warming and other threats. Such proposed levels of reduction also fail to fulfill the UN Charter's mandate for security at the least possible levels of armament.

Forsberg and Carlin contend that rather than subsidizing what seems like an endless stream of US military adventures on foreign soil, we should invest instead in promoting collaborative and complementary activities in conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding -- activities that can help maintain the peace in more efficient and cost-effective ways. Promoting such capacities is a key reason why Forsberg involved herself so deeply in (and the Carlin Family Foundation consistently supported) the development of GAPW, an organization dedicated to creating tools and networks to prevent and resolve conflict, rethink the assumptions and tools of global security, and respond justly, rapidly and effectively to outbreaks of atrocity crimes that cannot be solved by diplomacy alone. Forsberg and Carlin understood that a genuinely 'defensive defense' requires a stable and flexible global security architecture that can provide assurances to both states and peoples -- ensuring that threats to the peace can be handled effectively, fairly and at the earliest possible stages by the international community.

Over ten years after the initial writing of this piece, the security context of the US has changed in significant ways. Both strategies for military preparedness and the national conversation have drifted away from Cold War notions of deterrence-based nuclear threats towards a preoccupation with prosecuting the so-called "war on terrorism." Supplanting the Cold War "domino theory", we have now embraced an equally pervasive, if naïve, rationale: "We must fight them over there so we don't have to fight them over here". This framing for popular consumption is potent - it helped underwrite a reckless invasion in Iraq and sustain a war effort in Afghanistan that has become our most protracted and expensive conflict to date with no clear outcome, no discernable tangible benefits and no firm timetable for disengagement. It has also helped to sustain policies that project US military power in the far corners of the globe at great cost and with only anecdotal evidence that such a projection actually enhances our own (or anyone else's) national security.

Forsberg and Carlin don't question for a moment that we have a responsibility to keep US citizens safe from 9/11-style attacks. What they do ask is, "How much of the military budget actually addresses this kind of threat?" And while the answer has shifted somewhat in the era of "Homeland Security" and the large

expenditures demanded by that agency, the answer remains more or less the same as it was over a decade ago – not very much.

If we fail to correct the widespread, popular and prevailing view that today's inflated military budgets are truly geared towards an effective defense of the US homeland, then subsequent generations will be burdened with interest on debts incurred from pursuing these policies for many years to come—debts both financial and psychological. As Forsberg and Carlin noted some time ago, and as GAPW affirms, we owe these next generations more than a few canceled weapons systems and modestly reformed force structures. Rather, we owe them an honest 'rethink' of our notions of 'defense' coordinated with a commitment to spend no more than is needed to protect our homeland and enhance collective security. The savings available through such a 'rethink' would be sufficiently robust to significantly reduce our national debt, help us address diverse global crises, rebuild much of our crumbling infrastructure, and create sustainable employment opportunities for our citizens. A sensible, strategic commitment to the defense of the homeland can, in this way, help ensure the added security that comes from enhanced domestic prosperity.

We at GAPW are grateful for Alex Carlin's update of the 1999 Forsberg-Carlin piece, which provides an excellent starting point for a long-overdue discussion of military priorities and the way in which our current policy mindset endorses ruinous levels of military spending without proper framing and with virtually no debate about its long-term economic and social consequences. This article (with planned updates in coming years) provides policymakers and other engaged peoples direct access to relevant rationales and statistics that can help make the case for military spending that reflects Randall Forsberg's longstanding professional priorities - adequate defense of the homeland along with flexible response to military threats overseas and minimal deterrence capabilities. The article also gives civic leaders and concerned citizens another energizing, rallying point of reference to finally deconstruct the myth that national security requires that scandalous percentages of our national resources be spent on foreign military adventures.

The staff and partners of GAPW are committed to playing a facilitating role in this deconstruction. We welcome comments on the Forsberg-Carlin piece (coordinator@globalactionpw.org) as well as suggestions about the best and most effective ways to enact efficient, homeland-focused, military spending priorities.

Katherine Prizeman and Robert Zuber