

Americans: Cut Pentagon spending

By Lawrence Korb
March 18, 2005

It's fashionable for pundits to point to polls and claim the public is ignorant, ill-informed or apathetic. But an illuminating new survey released last Monday shows that – though citizens may indeed be confused about specific issues – they are clear about one federal agency whose budget should be cut.

That is, the Pentagon.

The survey, conducted by the Program for International Policy Alternatives, shows that 65 percent of the American public believes the federal government should transfer tax dollars out of several areas of the defense budget that have nothing to do with fighting the global war on terrorism.

Of those favoring Pentagon cuts, about two-thirds wanted some of the savings to be used to reduce the deficit. Poll respondents also suggested increasing the budgets for education, job training and employment, medical research, Veterans benefits and housing – which the Bush administration is trying to slash.

The most popular area for increased funds: conserving and developing renewable energy, which would reduce our dependence on Middle East oil and on authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia.

The PIPA poll is a wake-up call to both parties, not just the Republicans, for two reasons. First, both Democrats and Republicans polled suggested steep Pentagon cuts. The mean response by Democrats favored cutting \$39 billion; the mean response by Republicans \$30 billion.

Second, it's not just the Republicans, by any means, who've been running up the Pentagon budget. Politicians from both sides of the aisle continue to treat the Pentagon budget as a sacred cow, throwing more and more money at an array of weapons and research projects that make no sense in the post Sept. 11, 2001-era – particularly as the deficit climbs and nondefense programs are being squeezed.

For example, fresh from presiding over last year's record-high deficit, President Bush proposed last month to further increase the Pentagon budget by \$20 billion, and, at the same time, cut over 100 domestic

programs. As a result, the Pentagon consumes over half of the discretionary or controllable spending in the national budget. That's the money allocated by Congress each year.

By advocating the re-allocation of defense dollars, particularly during war, citizens are saying that American security requires much more than a rapidly increasing Pentagon budget. And they are right.

To achieve real security, America should do more to address the deficit and other federal deficiencies. And it's clear that Americans are ready to reduce some Pentagon spending in order to make progress in other areas, like the deficit and energy programs.

Americans do not focus on the specific details, but they indicated a number of general Pentagon areas that should be cut. Majorities of those favoring cuts pointed to: nuclear weapons, new types of destroyers, bombers, submarines and the capabilities for mounting large World War II-type ground wars.

There are plenty of ways America can safely make these cuts real, bringing Pentagon spending more in line with Americans' priorities.

Over \$40 billion in savings from wasteful Pentagon programs could be achieved quickly – by cutting only the most egregious examples of misplaced priorities. These programs include the F-22 Raptor fighter jet and Virginia Class submarines, designed to achieve superiority over Soviet jets and submarines that were never built; missile defense, proposed when terrorists were not our primary enemy; bases in Asia, Europe and here at home that are irrelevant in today's geopolitical reality.

That's the good news. With proper backbone, our country's political leaders could cut tens of billion in Pentagon waste, freeing real money for truly important uses, and the people will support them.

But then there's the bad news. The political leadership to get the job done hasn't materialized, despite the glaring need for America to tighten its fiscal belt and enhance our security in many areas.

It's time for our politicians in Washington to reflect the bravery of our service personnel around the globe, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, and cut the unnecessary spending in the defense budget.

■ Korb was an assistant secretary of defense under President Reagan. He is a fellow at the Center for American Progress and sits on the military advisory committee of Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities