

Next week, the House Budget Committee will consider the fiscal year 2012 budget resolution in what is expected to be a marathon committee markup. The committee faces a dire budget reality; with entitlement spending that is absorbing essentially all of our federal income, while non-security discretionary spending is dramatically increasing. We now borrow roughly forty cents of every dollar we spend. In this grim budget situation, we must dramatically cut federal spending and reform entitlements. However, I do not believe that all government spending is equal. Instead, I believe that the Constitution lays out certain responsibilities that are essential and can only be accomplished by the federal government—primarily providing for a common defense.

Next week, I expect to see amendments in the Budget Committee that will cut defense spending—either to transfer defense funds to domestic spending priorities, or simply to reduce the size of our deficit. I believe reducing defense spending right now is a bad idea—let me explain why.

First, our military is already stretched thin. Today we have troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, we are doing humanitarian relief in Japan, we are enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya and we are fighting piracy off of Somalia and more. Our soldiers and Marines are facing rapid and repeated deployments. While we may not agree that all of these missions are essential, it would be irresponsible to cut funds for troops that are in harms' way. While some may think that downsizing defense is as simple as cutting funding for futuristic weapons technology or changing our foreign policy posture, the reality is that most defense funding is paying for the military we have today, including fuel, maintenance, health care and salaries. Cutting defense spending will have a serious impact on the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines that are serving our country today as well as in the future.

Secondly, many who propose defense cuts argue that there must be waste in a budget the size of the Department of Defense, so cutting the defense budget is reasonable. I agree that there is waste, but simply chopping a percentage off the top of defense funding is an inefficient and irresponsible way of trying to eliminate wasteful spending. Congress is part of the problem, with funding levels that are unpredictable and oversight that is often weak or lacking. Getting rid of waste, fraud and abuse is necessary but it is a wholly inadequate budget strategy because these cuts represent a small percentage of the defense budget.

Thirdly, we must be clear about the fact that our budget crisis is driven primarily by entitlement spending. The Heritage Foundation has a chart that lays the problem out clearly (<http://www.h>

heritage.org/budgetchartbook/defense-entitlement-spending

). The chart would look even worse if interest on our debt, which functions much like an entitlement, is included. In 2010, total federal revenue was consumed by entitlement programs and interest on our debt. This will only get worse unless we seriously consider reforming these entitlements. The only way to address our budget situation long term is through entitlement reform.

Lastly, the preamble of our Constitution talks about *providing* for a common defense and *promoting* the general welfare. I believe the distinction between those words is important. The Constitution gives Congress the specific responsibility “to raise and support armies” as well as “provide and maintain a navy.” In contrast, the constitutionality of much entitlement spending is debatable. Should we cut what may be the most basic constitutional function of the government to pay for a function that is of a questionable constitutional nature?

Defense spending may be an attractive target in the Budget Committee markup and on the House floor shortly thereafter, but the Constitution prioritizes providing for a common defense and spending on defense should not be treated as equal to other portions of federal spending. There is no question we need to make sure we get every penny’s worth of value out of defense spending, but simply slashing defense is not the answer. Not only are there serious risks associated with cutting defense, it also would mean that we are cutting a constitutional priority of the government to pay for a series of programs of questionable constitutional merit.

Editorial by Congressman Todd Akin originally appeared on [The Foundry blog](#), March 31, 2011.