

Libya Turmoil Highlights US Military Spending. Next Step: Cuts.

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Abstract

In a contribution to the Christian Science Monitor, Donald Marron discusses America's renewed concern about defense spending in light of US military action in Libya.

Document date: April 12, 2011

Released online: April 18, 2011

Christian Science Monitor, The New Economy: Libya Turmoil Highlights US Military Spending. Next Step: Cuts.

America's military action in Libya has already had one unexpected side effect: renewed concern about defense spending.

In the first days of Operation Odyssey Dawn, America lost a \$55 million F-15 fighter and fired more than \$250 million worth of Tomahawk missiles. Jets consume millions of dollars in fuel and maintenance costs daily as they enforce the no-fly and no-drive zones. Analysts who have looked at similar efforts say that the costs of the operation could total about \$1 billion – potentially more if it drags on or escalates beyond expectations.

Those new costs have arrived in the middle of tense budget negotiations at home. Congress has been reduced to funding the government a few weeks at a time as Democrats and Republicans debate how much to reduce domestic spending.

In that debate, a billion dollars is a lot of money. Indeed, many of the specific items at issue – the National Endowment for the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and new enforcement activities by the Internal Revenue Service – each cost less than \$1 billion a year.

In terms of the overall federal budget, however, a billion dollars is a pittance. The United States is on track to spend about \$3.7 trillion this year. If this column represented all that spending, \$1 billion would amount to a single letter.

Odyssey Dawn is thus important to the budget debate not because of its initial costs, but because it puts military spending back in the headlines, where it belongs. The real money in defense, however, lies elsewhere.

This year the US will spend about \$110 billion in Afghanistan and \$44 billion in Iraq. Regular defense spending is even larger, at about \$550 billion. Military spending will total more than \$700 billion this year.

That spending gets far less scrutiny than it deserves. Discussions of our long-run budget challenges usually emphasize the big entitlement programs – Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security – and the need for new revenues. Congressional budget debates, meanwhile, have bogged down on the sliver of spending that goes to domestic discretionary programs.

Defense should be on the table as well. Military spending has more than doubled over the past decade. Some of that increase has been necessary to respond to the 9/11 attacks and the new challenges they revealed. But not all. Some of the increase has simply been excess.

Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made this clear in remarks in January. Because of the dramatic expansion of the Pentagon budget, he said, "We've lost our ability to prioritize, to make hard decisions, to do tough analysis, to make trades."

We also have embarrassingly little ability to track that spending. When the Government Accountability Office recently audited the government's finances, it concluded – as it has for many years – that the Defense Department's books are so poorly kept that they can't be audited. Taxpayers are thus giving \$700 billion a year to an organization that can't prioritize and can't tell us where the money is going. That's unacceptable.

With military intervention in Libya front and center, Congress should use this moment as inspiration for reviewing the defense budget. President Obama's fiscal commission and the Domenici-Rivlin debt-reduction task force (on which I served) recommended substantial cuts in defense spending as part of large deficit

reduction efforts. Those cuts could reduce our national debt by \$1 trillion over the next decade without compromising our security. Congress should act on them.

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