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TO: Interested Parties

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RE: Setting Priorities on the Defense Budget

Introduction

While our troops rotate back into the war zones of Afghanistan and Iraq again and again, some in Washington want the Department of Defense to lumber on with a military that is designed for the Cold War. This would be a serious mistake that could put our national security at risk. Instead, the near-term priority for our defense budget must be on restoring and reequipping our ground forces. In this time of fiscal strain, defense spending will stay relatively constant, thus spending must be carefully prioritized to support our ground forces.

In May, President Obama submitted to Congress a budget that strategically refocuses America's national security vision. We believe that the new Pentagon approach is sound. Most importantly, the President and Secretary Gates have made clear their commitment to refocusing on the wars of today and the foreseeable future, not the contingencies of the Cold War past.

There is no question that the American military must retain its technological supremacy. However, there is little threat to our dominance—our high-tech weapons do not have a peer competitor now, and they will not have any for the foreseeable future. By contrast, the ground troops of the Army and Marine Corps continue to be over-extended, posing a real threat to our present security and the future of the force.

We believe that the priority for defense spending must be on the ground forces. That means expanding the sizes of the Army and Marine Corps; investing in weapons and equipment to help them fight effectively; and enhancing home front support to service members and their families—a key factor ensuring high morale, recruitment, and retention.

Yet the House has included \$6.9 billion dollars in spending on equipment the Pentagon has deemed wasteful and unnecessary.¹ As the Senate considers the appropriations bill and the legislation heads to conference, we believe it must retain the two core principles outlined in the President's budget request: restoring the ground forces to full strength and choosing priorities appropriately to pay for it.

Restoring the Ground Forces to Full Strength

Our ground forces are still under strain.

Since early 2005, Third Way has been raising the alarm about the strain on US ground forces.² As we have repeatedly argued, the misadventure in Iraq, years of inattention to Afghanistan, and poor civilian stewardship under former President Bush combined to severely undermine the readiness, morale and effectiveness of our ground forces. This has led to a crisis, particularly for the Army, which has been left under-manned, under-trained, and under-equipped. With the confirmation of Secretary Gates in 2007 the situation began to improve, but he inherited a force severely out of balance, as well as difficult situations in Iraq and Afghanistan that made fixing the problems even tougher.

The strain on the force is measurable in many ways, including:

Retention: The Army is still hemorrhaging young officers. In 2007, West Point graduates left the service at the highest rate in 30 years,³ and today the Army is still facing a shortfall of 4,000 active-duty captains and majors.⁴ In fact, “for the first time in its history, the Army is introducing an advertising campaign to recruit officers.”⁵ While the departure rate of noncommissioned officers has slowed of late, the Army saw a 400% increase in departure of mid-grade sergeants from 2005 to 2007.⁶

Deployment: As of March 2009, nearly 1,830,000 troops had served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and more than 715,000 had been there more than once. Indeed, eight years into the wars, many soldiers and Marines are facing their fourth tour or more.⁷

Tempo: Another sign of strain is operational tempo. In determining how much time troops need between deployments, the Army baseline ratio is 1:2—for every one year deployed, troops should have at least two years at home for rest, preparation, and training. Despite significant improvement, the Army is still not coming close to its own standard: tours have been cut to 12 months, but most soldiers still receive only about 12 months of dwell time between deployments, a ratio of only 1:1.

Readiness: Previous Third Way reports have quoted Army Chief of Staff General George Casey observing that “the current demand for our forces exceeds the sustainable supply.”⁸ This is still true, and it has worrying consequences. For example, America does not currently have a “ready brigade”—a unit prepared for combat on short notice elsewhere in the world. This presents an unacceptable strategic risk.

Equipment: The pace of fighting two wars has taken a huge toll on the equipment that our warfighters need. Our prepositioned weapons stocks have been depleted and troops have been forced to train with outdated or unfamiliar weapons. As the former Army Chief noted: “To meet our immediate wartime needs, we pooled equipment from across the force to equip soldiers deploying in harm’s way... This increases the risk for our next-to-deploy units, and limits our ability to respond to emerging strategic contingencies.”⁹ Major pieces of Army equipment are being operated at rates 10-20 times greater than those of just a few years ago. What was once a year’s worth of equipment operation is now routinely exceeded in a few weeks.

The next defense budget must continue to relieve the pressure.

For the long-term health of our ground forces, two things must happen: a reduction in deployments and/or an increase in troops. Fortunately, the administration has announced that it is doing both. In February, the President announced a drawdown plan for Iraq, which calls for an end to the combat mission in Iraq by August 2010 and a withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq by 2011. His plan would keep a transitional force in Iraq of up to 50,000 U.S. troops to train and advise Iraqi forces.¹⁰

However, while we welcome the drawdown in Iraq, the pressure on our troops will continue for some time. Our present troop level in Iraq is still 135,000.¹¹ And the US now has about 57,000 troops on the ground in Afghanistan. **Today, we have about 192,000 troops deployed to the two war zones—almost exactly the number deployed at the height of the surge.**¹² Moreover, the commander of our forces in Afghanistan is reviewing the troop status now and has not ruled out requests for more troops.¹³

Secretary Gates made it a priority to expand the total size of the force—increasing the Army by 65,000 and the Marine Corps by 27,000, for an expansion of 92,000 troops. He also recently approved another 22,000 for the Army to fill out under-manned units. The Army and Marine Corps are ahead of schedule in filling the new billets, and after these changes are implemented, our total end-strength will be about 1.5 million active-duty troops.¹⁴ But relative to other wartime efforts in US history, each of which has been met with conscription and a huge increase in the size of the force, we still have a relatively small, all-volunteer military shouldering a long, difficult and bloody burden.

Choosing Priorities

Adding troops is vitally important, but it is not cheap. For each 20,000 additional soldiers, we spend roughly \$3 billion a year.¹⁵ That means that the currently planned expansion will cost roughly \$65 billion from 2007-13, with \$32 billion to the Army, \$25 billion to the Marine Corps and the rest to the Army Reserves/National Guard.¹⁶ As Secretary Gates has noted, the planned increase in troops will require a nearly \$11 billion increase above the FY '09 budget level. Senator Lieberman introduced a resolution to speed the upcoming increase of 30,000 soldiers by one year, a worthy goal but one that would add even more cost.

Meeting these needs will require that Congress make choices, and the question is where the \$11 billion (plus) will come from. The Obama/Gates budget proposal would finance the costly increase in troops through a number of cuts to weapons systems, including the F-22. The calculus is simple - as Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell has noted: "We cannot afford things we do not need, because it forces us to take money from something else that we do need."¹⁷

We agree with Secretary Gates that the priority should be on expanding and resetting the ground forces. As he has argued this budget represents a "radically sane set of proposals. They don't represent a cut, and where we have eliminated one program, [we] have added to others."¹⁸

Endnotes

¹ R. Jeffrey Smith, "House seems to be set on Pork Padded Defense Bill," *Washington Post*, July 30, 2009.

² See, e.g., "Boots on the Ground: Increasing the Size of the Army to Meet the Missions of the 21st Century," May, 2005; *The Blunted Spear III: The Iraq War and US War-Fighting Ability*, Third Way, April 2, 2009 ("the security of the United States is at risk because the Army is unable to function as it should," because of inadequate time for troops and equipment to recuperate between deployments."). Available at www.thirdway.org.

³ Bryan Bender, "West Point grads exit service at high rate: War's redeployments thought a major factor", *Boston Globe*, April 11, 2007.

⁴ "Byrne talks about retention, deployment", *Stars and Stripes*, June 4, 2009.

⁵ Douglas Quenqua, "With Enough Soldiers, The Army Is Looking For A Few Good Officers", *The New York Times*, August 3, 2009.

⁶ Gordon Lubold, "Key US Army ranks begin to thin", *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 2, 2007.

⁷ *Veterans for Common Sense*, "DoD Fact Sheet: Impact of Iraq and Afghanistan Wars: Official Military Battlefield Casualties top 82,000", March 13, 2009.

⁸ "The Blunted Spear II: The Army at the Breaking Point", Third Way, November 20, 2007

⁹ Gen. (Ret.) Peter Schoomaker (USA), Feb. 2007.

¹⁰ Gina Cavallaro, "Casey: 9-month deployments in 2 years," *Army Times*, April 29, 2009.

¹¹ Robert H. Reid, "Iraq slides election until January", Associated Press, May 18, 2009
http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090518/ap_on_re_mi_ea/ml_iraq.

¹² 192,000 troops were deployed at the height of the surge. See JoAnne O'Bryant and Michael Waterhouse, "US Forces in Iraq", CRS Report to Congress, July 24, 2008 & JoAnne O'Bryant and Michael Waterhouse, "US Forces in Afghanistan", CRS Report to Congress, July 15, 2008.

¹³ Ann Scott Tyson, "No Limit in Place for Pending Request on Troops in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, July 2, 2009.

¹⁴ Michael O'Hanlon, "Who Will Fight For Us," *Orbis*, Summer 2009, Volume 53, Issue 3, p. 405.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "Estimated Cost of the Administration's Proposal to Increase the Army's and the Marine Corps's Personnel Levels," Congressional Budget Office, April 16, 2007, p. 3. Available at: <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA474773&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>.

¹⁷ Lolita Baldor, "Pentagon eyes plan to increase Army by 30,000," Associated Press, July 16, 2009.

¹⁸ "Gates Optimistic on 2010 US Budget Defense Success," Reuters, May 2, 2009.