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Mr. Gates and the Pentagon Budget

There has been a feeding frenzy at the Pentagon budget trough since the 9/11 attacks. Pretty much anything the military chiefs and industry lobbyists pitched, Congress approved — no matter the cost and no matter if the weapons or programs were over budget, underperforming or no longer needed in a post-cold-war world.

Annual defense spending has nearly doubled in the last decade to \$549 billion. That does not include the cost of the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, which this year will add \$159 billion.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates has now vowed to do things differently. In two recent speeches, he declared that the nation cannot keep spending at this rate and that the defense budget “gusher” has been “turned off and will stay off for a good period of time.” He vowed that going forward all current programs and future spending requests will receive “unsparing” scrutiny.

Mr. Gates isn’t proposing cutting his budget. He’s talking about 2 percent to 3 percent real growth after inflation, compared with 4 percent a year in 2000 to 2009. Given the nation’s dire financial state, it’s still a lot.

The Obama administration has already chopped some big-ticket, anachronistic weapons. (It stood up to the lobbyists and Congressional boosters to kill the F-22 fighter jet.) There has been more investment in needed new weapons, most notably unmanned drones. The [Quadrennial Defense Review](#) talked sternly about the need for “future trade-offs,” although it failed to start making the hard choices.

Mr. Gates said he wants to trim the bloated civilian and military bureaucracy (including excess admirals and generals) for a modest savings of \$10 billion to \$15 billion annually. He wants

more cuts in weapons spending, and he deserves credit for naming specific systems.

Why should the Navy have 11 aircraft carriers (at \$11 billion a copy) for the next 30 years when no other country has more than one, he asked at the Navy League exposition in Maryland. He questioned the need for the Marines' beach-storming Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle (vulnerable to advances in anti-ship systems) and \$7 billion ballistic missile submarines for the Navy.

We're sure the irate calls from Capitol Hill and K Street haven't stopped since. It must be noted that Mr. Gates didn't say for sure whether he would slash any of these systems — or how deeply.

Perhaps the most politically volatile issue is military health care costs, which rose from \$19 billion to \$50 billion in a decade. Active-duty military and their families rightly do not pay for health care. But what retirees pay — \$460 annually per family — has not risen in 15 years.

Mr. Gates said that many retirees earn full-time salaries on top of their military retirement pay and could get coverage through their employer. We owe our fighting forces excellent care, but this is a time when everyone must share the burden.

Even if Mr. Gates begins to get a real handle on other costs, budget experts warn that exploding personnel costs — wages, health care, housing, pensions — will increasingly crowd out financing for new weapons. Once the United States commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, Washington will have to consider trimming troop strength, beginning with the Navy and Air Force.

Mr. Gates is an old Washington hand and we're sure he is going into this fight with his eyes wide open. Still, if there was any doubt about what he's up against, a House Armed Services subcommittee gave him a reminder last week. It added nearly \$400 million to the Pentagon's \$9.9 billion 2011 request for missile defenses. That included \$50 million for an airborne laser that experts agree doesn't work and Mr. Gates largely canceled last year.