The Daily Dish

Defense Budget Danger

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Eakinomics: Defense Budget Danger

The Budget Control Act (BCA) put year-by-year caps on defense discretionary spending, comparable caps on non-defense discretionary spending, and enforced those caps with an across-the-board "sequester" — a kind of budgetary meat ax — of any potential spending in excess of the caps. The caps and sequester did not represent, in particular, a defense spending policy decision. Instead, they were set to meet budgetary targets driven by the abject failure of Congress and the Administration to get serious about the real budget threat: explosive growth in entitlement spending. The budgetary bottom line is that each year Congress fails to rein in mandatory entitlement spending. More troubling is the serial failure to meet its duty to objectively assess and fund the genuine defense needs of the United States.

This pattern has gone from negligent to dangerous. As noted by Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain: "The state of our military is dire. The overwhelming majority of our forces are not fit for combat in the near-term.

• Only three of out 59 Army brigades are combat-ready.
• Just 4 of 64 Air Force squadrons are ready to 'fight tonight'.
• Less than half of the Marine and Navy planes are ready for combat.
• The Air Force has a pilot shortfall of 1,500, 1,000 of which are fighter pilots.
• The Navy has a maintenance backlog of 5.4 million man-days scheduled for 2017.

The hard truth is, our military is declining."

It is probably worse than that. In 2017, tragic collisions of the USS Fitzgerald and the USS John McCain claimed the lives of 17 sailors. This is a sad ratification of a recent report of the Government Accountability Office that concluded its work "shows that the Navy has increased deployment lengths, shortened training periods, and reduced or deferred

maintenance to meet high operational demands, which has resulted in declining ship conditions and a worsening trend in overall readiness." Also this year, flight mishaps have killed 27 servicemen in the Army, Navy and Marine Corps and there have been 16 Army fatal on-duty ground accidents. If you include the naval collisions there have been at least 60 deaths in 2017.

Chronic underfunding of our armed services is increasingly dangerous. As House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mac Thornberry put it, "We have too few planes that can fly, too few ships that can sail and too few soldiers who can deploy. A total of 185 service members lost their lives in non-combat accidents over the past three years — more than four times as many as the 44 who were killed in combat."

It is past time to repeal the caps and sequester, and annually pass appropriations to fund the Defense Department. Today marks the 16th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 that left thousands of Americans dead. In their aftermath many swore that the United States would never again leave itself unable to defend its citizens and values. That pledge is in danger.