

Town Hall Meetings and National Security

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In a recent address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (17 August 2009), President Obama reiterated his plan to reshape the military establishment. In this respect, he considered “it a waste of tax dollars to continue with a doctrine and weapons better suited to fight the Soviets on the plains of Europe than insurgents in the rugged terrain of Afghanistan.” He went on to say “this is simply not acceptable. It is irresponsible. Our troops and taxpayers deserve better.” The President’s makeover of defense doctrine and spending includes increasing the size of the Army and Marine Corps, slowing the Navy building program, (10 carriers after 2040) while maintaining, in general, the size and capability of the Air Force, i.e. production of the F-22 Fighter will end, while F-35 Joint Strike Fighter buys will be increased. Funding for the Predator-class unmanned aerial vehicle and helicopters will be increased as will pay for military personnel. The Missile Defense Program will be reduced by \$1.4 billion; more ground forces will be sent to Afghanistan while the drawdown of forces in Iraq will continue. The above are examples of trade offs in the defense budget. For example, are fewer carriers a good trade off for more ground troops? Are unmanned surveillance vehicles a good trade off for fewer on the ground intelligence personnel? Dozens of new programs and cancellation of old ones (trade offs) are proposed. Finally, Can a war in Europe be completely ruled out?

During the August congressional recess most Americans have seen on television or read about “Town Hall Meetings” hosted by President Obama and the various members of Congress seeking input with respect to current issues facing the nation. The robust give and take in these meetings is fair evidence of citizen interest in health care, unemployment, the need for and the amount of stimulus spending, and the current and long term budget deficits. Beyond question, however, is that the American public is vitally interested in the nation’s defense capabilities in a still dangerous world and in our ability not only to defend ourselves, but also to defend American interests worldwide as

well as remain a credible partner with respect to our various mutual defense treaties and agreements. Granting the above, why then so few, if any, questions were asked about a defense budget of some \$664 billion, a budget only exceeded by totaling social security, medicare and medicade expenses. Nor was much attention given to the Afghan and Iraq wars and our foreign policy as it affects national security

The always interest by the American public in national defense and the lack of questions about it in town hall meetings is a paradox and one not easily explained. Some possibilities include taking for granted that the administration and Congress will adequately provide for America's security without citizen input and that the amount proposed for stimulus packages and health care in 2009 and the attendant deficits, estimated in the trillions of dollars, over shadows all other issues. Another possibility is that the American citizen/taxpayer, while concerned about national security, is hesitant to ask questions in the area due to a lack of knowledge, especially in details with respect to specific questions that might otherwise asked. With regard to the latter, lack of information, one suggestion is to take advantage of internet resources. As to the threats facing the United States, which is the bedrock basis for any defense budget, go to "Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence." For the current proposed defense budget almost any enquiry will suffice. . . "DoD defense budget, Summary of DoD defense budget, defense spending, etc." Although these sources are somewhat lengthy, they are still easy reads.

While health care, unemployment and budget deficits are important none are more important than national security. Mistakes can be made and corrected in other areas; mistakes in national security could make mistakes in the others redundant.