**How much military is enough?**

**by** [**Jill Lepore**](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/jill_lepore/search?contributorName=jill%20lepore)

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***The U.S. once regarded a standing army as a form of tyranny. Now it spends more on defense than all other nations combined.***

Sixty-two legislators sit on the House Armed Services Committee, the largest committee in Congress. Since January, 2011, when Republicans took control of the House, the committee has been chaired by Howard P. McKeon, who goes by Buck. He has never served in the military, but this month he begins his third decade representing California’s Twenty-fifth Congressional District, the home of a naval weapons station, an Army fort, an Air Force base, and, for the Marines, a place to train for mountain warfare.[\*](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2013/01/28/130128crat_atlarge_lepore?printable=true#editorsnote1) McKeon believes that it’s his job to protect the Pentagon from budget cuts. On New Year’s Day, after a thirteenth-hour deal was sealed with spit in the Senate, McKeon issued a press statement lamenting that the compromise had failed to “shield a wartime military from further reductions.”

The debate about taxes is over, which is one of the few good things that can be said for it. The debate about spending, which has already proved narrow and grubby, is pending.

The United States spends more on defense than all the other nations of the world combined. Between 1998 and 2011, military spending doubled, reaching more than seven hundred billion dollars a year—more, in adjusted dollars, than at any time since the Allies were fighting the Axis. The 2011 Budget Control Act, which raised the debt ceiling and created both the fiscal cliff and a Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, which was supposed to find a way to steer clear of it, required four hundred and eighty-seven billion dollars in cuts to military spending, spread over the next ten years. The cliff-fall mandates an additional defense-budget reduction of fifty-five billion dollars annually. None of these cuts have gone into effect. McKeon has been maneuvering to hold the line.

In the fall of 2011, McKeon convened a series of hearings on “The Future of National Defense and the United States Military Ten Years After 9/11.” The first hearing was held on September 8th, the same day as, and down the hall from, the first meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, which is known as the Supercommittee. It was no one’s finest hour. By the time McKeon gavelled his meeting to order, just after ten in the morning, only seventeen members of the House Armed Services Committee (five Democrats and twelve Republicans) had shown up to hear the three former heads of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who had been called to testify. Congressional attendance lies, ordinarily, somewhere between spotty and lousy. In committees, roll is generally called only if there’s a vote, and, despite pressure for reform, attendance isn’t even recorded except on “gavel sheets,” compiled by staffers, which are said to be unreliable. In short, it’s easy for lawmakers to skip meetings in which there’s little to be decided. In any case, the point of the Armed Services Committee hearings wasn’t really to debate the future of the American military; it was to give the Department of Defense the chance to argue against the automatic, across-the-board cuts that were scheduled to go into effect this month if the Supercommittee failed to reach a compromise.

“Our nation finds itself at a strategic juncture,” McKeon began. “Osama bin Laden is dead. Al Qaeda is on its back. The Taliban has lost its strategic momentum in Afghanistan, and Iraq is an emerging democracy.” Yet, “faced with serious economic challenges, we are slipping back into the September 10th mentality that a solid defense can be dictated by budget choices, not strategic ones.”

He then welcomed prepared remarks from two former chairs of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and one former vice-chair. No one denied the size of the deficit. At issue was whether military spending should be on the table or off. General Peter Pace, of the Marine Corps, insisted that it was inappropriate to look at defense “from a dollar-and-cents perspective.” Better to count risks and threats: Iran, North Korea, and, looking ahead, China. Admiral Edmund P. Giambastiani, Jr., compared the prospective cuts to “performing brain surgery with a chainsaw.” General Richard B. Myers, of the Air Force, declared that “the world is a more dangerous and uncertain place today than it has been for decades.”

None of this was contested by anyone, including the ranking Democrat, Adam Smith, a lawyer from Bellevue, Washington, who has served on the House Armed Services Committee since 1997 and who agreed that “defense is in an incredibly vulnerable position” because budget cuts, which could lead to force reductions and base closings, would “change the equation of power projection.” Around the world, “power projection” is, in fact, a central mission of American forces. Smith expressed alarm at the prospect of its diminishment. He asked a question, which was purely rhetorical: “What if, all of a sudden, we don’t have troops in Europe, we don’t have troops in Asia, we are just, frankly, like pretty much every other country in the world?”

The long history of military spending in the United States begins with the establishment of the War Department, in 1789. At first, the Secretary of War, a Cabinet member who, from the start, was a civilian, was called the Secretary at War, a holdover from the Revolution but also a prepositional manifestation of an ideological commitment: the department was chiefly to be called upon only if the nation was at war. Early Americans considered a standing army—a permanent army kept even in times of peace—to be a form of tyranny. “What a deformed monster is a standing army in a free nation,” Josiah Quincy, of Boston, wrote in 1774. Instead, they favored militias. About the first thing Henry Knox did when he became George Washington’s War Secretary was to draft a plan for establishing a uniform militia.

Beginning in 1822, congressional oversight was handled by two standing committees: one for the Army, the other for the Navy. A committee on the militia, established in 1815, was abolished in 1911—the militia itself having been essentially abandoned. Six years later, the United States entered the First World War, and the staggering devastation of that war raised both new and old fears about the business of arming men. In 1934, the publication of “Merchants of Death,” a best-seller and a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, contributed to the formation, that year, of the Senate Munitions Committee, headed by Gerald P. Nye, a North Dakota Republican. Not coincidentally, that was also the year Congress passed the National Firearms Act, which, among other things, strictly regulated the private ownership of machine guns. (Keeping military weapons out of the hands of civilians seemed to the Supreme Court, when it upheld the Firearms Act, in 1939, entirely consistent with the Second Amendment, which provides for the arming of militias.) For two years, Nye led the most rigorous inquiry into the arms industry that any branch of the federal government has ever conducted. He convened ninety-three hearings. He thought the ability to manufacture weapons should be restricted to the government. “The removal of the element of profit from war would materially remove the danger of more war,” he said. That never came to pass, partly because Nye was unable to distinguish his opposition to arms profiteering from his advocacy of isolationism, a position that had become indefensible.

Not until the Second World War did the United States establish what would become a standing army. And even that didn’t happen without dissent. In May of 1941, Robert Taft, a Republican senator from Ohio, warned that America’s entry into the Second World War would mean, ultimately, that the United States “will have to maintain a police force perpetually in Germany and throughout Europe.” Taft, like Nye, was an ardent isolationist. “Frankly, the American people don’t want to rule the world, and we are not equipped to do it. Such imperialism is wholly foreign to our ideals of democracy and freedom,” he said. “It is not our manifest destiny or our national destiny.” In 1944, when Nye ran for reëlection, he was defeated. Taft three times failed to win the Republican Presidential nomination. The Second World War demonstrated the folly of their vantage on foreign policy. It also made it more difficult to speak out against arms manufacturers and proponents of boundless military spending.

A peace dividend expected after the Allied victory in 1945 never came. Instead, the fight against Communism arrived, as well as a new bureaucratic regime. In 1946, the standing committees on military and naval affairs combined to become the Armed Services Committee. Under amendments to the National Security Act of 1947, which created the position of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the War Department, now housed for the first time in a building of its own, became the Department of Defense.

Meanwhile, during Senate hearings concerning the future of the national defense, military contractors such as the Lockheed Corporation[\*](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2013/01/28/130128crat_atlarge_lepore?printable=true#editorsnote3)—which was an object of Nye’s investigation in the nineteen-thirties, and built more than ten thousand aircraft during the Second World War—argued not only for military expansion but also for federal subsidies. In 1947, Lockheed’s[\*](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2013/01/28/130128crat_atlarge_lepore?printable=true#editorsnote3) chief executive told a Senate committee that the nation needed funding for military production that was “adequate, continuous, and permanent.”

In the nineteen-fifties, at the height of both the Korean War and McCarthyism, the United States’ foreign policy had become the containment of Communism the world over, and military spending made up close to three-quarters of the federal budget. “Defense,” no less than “national security,” is a product and an artifact of the Cold War. So, in large part, is the budget for it.

On September 8, 2011, when Buck McKeon convened the first of his House Armed Services Committee hearings on the future of the military, no one much disputed the idea that the manifest destiny of the United States is to patrol the world. Truth be told, no one asked any particularly searching questions at all. The only real flareup occurred when McKeon had to suspend the session briefly owing to the noise of protesters in the hall. “This demonstration that is going on outside is not to do with us,” the chairman explained. (It was a spillover from the Supercommittee.)

Still, John Garamendi, a Democrat from California, who during the Vietnam War served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia, read aloud from “Chance for Peace,” Eisenhower’s first major address as President, delivered before the American Society of Newspaper Editors on April 16, 1953. Eisenhower had sought the Republican Presidential nomination in order to defeat Taft and the isolationist wing of the G.O.P., but, six years into the Cold War, he was as worried as Nye had been about what an arms race would cost. In the speech, Eisenhower reckoned the price of arms:

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. This is a world in arms. This world in arms is not spending money alone; it is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. . . . This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the clouds of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.

Eisenhower, a five-star general who during the Second World War had served as the Supreme Allied Commander, was the son of pacifist Mennonites who considered war a sin, as James Ledbetter reports in “Unwarranted Influence: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Military-Industrial Complex” (Yale). Ledbetter writes that “when, as a child, Dwight began to show a voracious appetite for military history, his mother was disturbed and tried to keep the family’s history books locked in a closet.” Better known, if less stark, than “Chance for Peace” is the farewell address that Eisenhower delivered when he left office, in 1961, after years of failing to end the U.S.-Soviet arms race. “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex,” Eisenhower warned then. “Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.”

If any arms manufacturer today holds what Eisenhower called “unwarranted influence,” it is Lockheed Martin. The firm’s contracts with the Pentagon amount to some thirty billion dollars annually, as William D. Hartung, the director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy, reports in his book “Prophets of War: Lockheed Martin and the Making of the Military-Industrial Complex” (Nation). Today, Lockheed Martin spends fifteen million dollars a year on lobbying efforts and campaign contributions. The company was the single largest contributor to Buck McKeon’s last campaign. (Lockheed Martin has a major R. & D. center in McKeon’s congressional district.) This patronage hardly distinguishes McKeon from his colleagues on Capitol Hill. Lockheed Martin contributed to the campaigns of nine of the twelve members of the Supercommittee, fifty-one of the sixty-two members of the House Armed Services Committee, twenty-four of the twenty-five members of that committee’s Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces—in all, to three hundred and eighty-six of the four hundred and thirty-five members of the 112th Congress.

The merchants-of-death argument explains only so much, as the political scientist Daniel Wirls observes in “Irrational Security: The Politics of Defense from Reagan to Obama” (Johns Hopkins): “The military-industrial complex, such as it is, does not produce the propensity or predisposition for war or even hawkish policies short of conflict, as much as war or hawkish policies (driven primarily by political decisions) produce an opening for the military-industrial coalition to take advantage of the biases built into the system that favor, over the long run, hawkish policies.” Ledbetter is less concerned with Eisenhower’s military-industrial complex than with private contractors, abuses of civil liberties, and foreign arms sales (the U.S. sells more guns than any other country), which, he believes, together “constitute an overreaching military-industrial complex at least equal to the one Eisenhower warned against” and create “problems that cannot simply be resolved with more rational budgets.” Neither can these problems be solved without thinking about guns sold, owned, and carried within the United States. At home and abroad, in uniform and out, in war and in peace, Americans are armed to the teeth.

“Every gun that is made,” Eisenhower said, “signifies, in the final sense, a theft.” During that first hearing, when Garamendi finished quoting Eisenhower, he invited General Myers to comment. Myers said, “I wonder what President Eisenhower would have done in New York City on 9/12/2001.”

In 2001, military spending, as a function of the over-all American economy, was, at six per cent, the lowest it had been since the Second World War. Then, for a decade, it rose. In much the same way that the peace dividend expected with the Allied victory never came because of the Cold War (during most of which military spending made up roughly half the federal budget), a peace dividend expected after the end of the Warsaw Pact, in 1991, came but didn’t last. Instead, after 9/11 the United States declared a “global war on terror,” a fight against fear itself. The Iraq War, 2003-11, went on longer than the American Revolution. The war in Afghanistan, begun in 2001, isn’t over yet, making it the second-longest war in American history. (Only Vietnam lasted longer.) Troops may be withdrawn in 2014; the fighting will rage on. During George W. Bush’s second term, the National Defense Strategy of the United States became “ending tyranny in our world.” But a war to end tyranny has no end; it’s not even a war.

The United States, separated from much of the world by two oceans and bordered by allies, is, by dint of geography, among the best-protected countries on earth. Nevertheless, six decades after V-J Day nearly three hundred thousand American troops are stationed overseas, including fifty-five thousand in Germany, thirty-five thousand in Japan, and ten thousand in Italy. Much of the money that the federal government spends on “defense” involves neither securing the nation’s borders nor protecting its citizens. Instead, the U.S. military enforces American foreign policy.

“We have hundreds of military bases all over the world,” Melvin A. Goodman observes in “National Insecurity: The Cost of American Militarism” (City Lights). “Few other countries have any.” Goodman, a former Army cryptographer and a longtime C.I.A. analyst who taught at the National War College for eighteen years, is one of a growing number of critics of U.S. military spending, policy, and culture who are veterans of earlier wars. Younger veterans are critical, too. A 2011 Pew survey of veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq found that half thought the war in Afghanistan wasn’t worth fighting, and nearly sixty per cent thought the Iraq War wasn’t.

The most persuasive of these soldier-critics is Andrew J. Bacevich, a West Point graduate who fought in Vietnam in 1970 and 1971; served as a career Army officer, rising to the rank of colonel; and is now a professor of history and international relations at Boston University. A Catholic and a conservative, Bacevich is viscerally pained by Americans’ “infatuation with military power.” Everything, in Bacevich’s account, comes back to Vietnam, the way it does for a great many of that war’s veterans, including Chuck Hagel, the President’s nominee for Secretary of Defense.

Lately, Bacevich argues, Americans “have fallen prey to militarism, manifesting itself in a romanticized view of soldiers, a tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness, and outsized expectations regarding the efficacy of force. To a degree without precedent in U.S. history, Americans have come to define the nation’s strength and well-being in terms of military preparedness, military action, and the fostering of (or nostalgia for) military ideals.” Even as military spending has soared, war has become more distant: less known than imagined, less remembered than forgotten. War has become a fantasy: sleek, glossy, high-tech (more “Top Gun” than “Apocalypse Now”), and bloodless. Americans have less experience of war, and know less about the military, than at any point in the past century. Since 9/11, at any given time about one-half of one per cent of Americans have been on active duty. Only a tiny minority of members of Congress have known combat, or have family members who have. “God help this country when someone sits in this chair who doesn’t know the military as well as I do,” Eisenhower once said. From Reagan to Obama, but especially during the Administrations of the past three Presidents, none of whom ever saw active duty, civilian thinking about foreign policy has been subordinated to military thinking. The State Department has deferred to the Department of Defense. And the Commander-in-Chief has deferred to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The United States, a nation founded on opposition to a standing army, is now a nation engaged in a standing war. Bacevich locates the origins of America’s permanent war more than a decade before 9/11. “During the entire Cold War era, from 1945 through 1988, large-scale U.S. military actions abroad totalled a scant six,” he reports. “Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, they have become almost annual events.” Bacevich places much of the blame for this state of affairs on intellectuals, especially neoconservatives like Norman Podhoretz and Donald Rumsfeld, but also liberals, who, he points out, have eagerly supported the use of the military and of military force “not as an obstacle to social change but as a venue in which to promote it.” The resort to force is not a partisan position; it is a product of political failure.

And a failure, as well, of political culture. CNN loudmouths, neocon opinion-page columnists, retired generals who run for office, Hollywood action-film directors, Jerry Falwell, Wesley Clark, Tom Clancy, Bill Clinton—Bacevich has long since lost patience with all these people. He deplores their ego-driven mythmaking, their love of glory, their indifference to brutality.

War, by its nature, is barbarous, grievous, and untamable. There never has been a “smart war.” Still, some wars are worse than others. “Surely, the surprises, disappointments, painful losses, and woeful, even shameful failures of the Iraq War make clear the need to rethink the fundamentals of U.S. military policy,” Bacevich suggested in his 2005 book “The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War.” That scrutiny has not yet been given, not least because, as Bacevich has observed, “The citizens of the United States have essentially forfeited any capacity to ask first-order questions about the fundamentals of national security policy.” Don’t ask, don’t tell. But, especially, don’t ask.

In 2007, Bacevich’s only son, Andrew Bacevich, Jr., a twenty-seven-year-old first lieutenant in the U.S. Army’s First Cavalry Division,[\*](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2013/01/28/130128crat_atlarge_lepore?printable=true#editorsnote4) died of wounds sustained during combat in Iraq. Bacevich didn’t testify at Buck McKeon’s hearings on the military’s future in 2011, but he did testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2009, when its chairman, John Kerry, convened a hearing about the war in Afghanistan. This winter, the President nominated Kerry as Secretary of State.

During the hearing on Afghanistan, Kerry looked exhausted. “Colonel Bacevich,” he said, “you get to be the wrap-up.”

Bacevich read a statement. Kerry listened intently, covering his mouth with his hand.

The war in Afghanistan, Bacevich said, reminded him of Vietnam and of how, in 1971, Kerry testified before this committee on behalf of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. “Yet there’s one notable difference between today and the day, thirty-eight years ago, when the chairman of this committee testified against the then seemingly endless Vietnam War,” Bacevich said. “When the young John Kerry spoke, many of his contemporaries had angrily turned against their generation’s war. Today, most of the contemporaries of those fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan have simply tuned out.”

Kerry picked up his pen.

Bacevich read on: “Recall that in his testimony before this committee, speaking on behalf of other antiwar veterans, the young John Kerry remarked that ‘we are probably angriest about all that we were told about Vietnam, and about the mystical war against Communism.’ ”

Kerry looked down at his notes.

“The mystical war against Communism,” Bacevich said, “finds its counterpart in the mystical war on terrorism.” Mystification, he said, leads us to exaggerate threats and ignore costs. “It prevents us from seeing things as they are.”

People in the room began to applaud.

Kerry wiped his brow. “Please, folks,” he begged. “We will have no demonstrations of any kind.”

On October 13, 2011, at the fifth of Buck McKeon’s hearings on the future of the military, the House Armed Services Committee heard testimony from Leon Panetta, the Secretary of Defense, and General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Committee attendance was bad, but better than before. (Eleven Democrats and twenty-two Republicans were in the room when the hearing began.)

“There are some in government who want to use the military to pay for the rest, to protect the sacred cow that is entitlement spending,” McKeon said, in his opening remarks, referring to Social Security and Medicare. “Not only should that be a non-starter from a national-security and economic perspective, but it should also be a non-starter from a moral perspective.” Cuts should be made, he said, not to “the protector of our prosperity” but to “the driver of the debt.”

“The driver of our debt is our military-complex machine!” someone shouted from the gallery.

The Capitol Hill Police stepped in and arrested several protesters, including Leah Bolger, the vice-president of Veterans for Peace.

“The war machine is killing this country!” she cried, as she was carried away.

The hearing resumed. McKeon introduced Panetta. But the moment Panetta began to speak a protester interrupted. He identified himself as an Iraq War veteran. “You are murdering people!” he shouted. “I saw what we did to people. I saw.” He was escorted out of the room.

The hearing lasted two more hours. Much time was spent defending defense spending. “I don’t believe that the D.O.D. should have to pay one penny more in discretionary budget cuts,” McKeon said. Much time was devoted to inventorying threats to national security, which, Panetta said, are only increasing in both danger and number. (His list included Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and North Africa.)

Hank Johnson, a Democrat from Georgia, attempted to draw an analogy between the Capitol Hill Police’s ability to arrest protesters in a hearing room in the Rayburn House Office Building and the deployment of U.S. forces in every corner of the globe. “From time to time, there are disturbances throughout the world, and these disturbances may interrupt some of our various interests around the world, and it is necessary for us to have some kind of force to maintain order,” he said. “It is like competition, like capitalism.”

Protesters are by no means uncommon at congressional hearings, but this particular protest had rattled people. “I know we started the day with protesters in the room, and sometimes they seem disruptive or their tactics are some we might argue with,” Chellie Pingree, a Democrat from Maine, said. “But, frankly, we are facing a time when there are protesters in almost every city where we reside or represent.”

This time—emboldened, maybe, by the protesters—a few committee members offered comments that were more pointed. Niki Tsongas, a Democrat from Massachusetts, told Dempsey, “I would hope you also take into account that not every risk can be dealt with through a military response.” And the questions were tougher. Walter B. Jones, a Republican[\*](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2013/01/28/130128crat_atlarge_lepore?printable=true#editorsnote2) from North Carolina, asked Panetta, “Why are we still in Afghanistan?”

Panetta circled around an answer. “One thing we do not want,” he said, “is Afghanistan becoming a safe haven again for Al Qaeda.”

“Mr. Secretary,” Jones pressed, “we got bin Laden, and Al Qaeda has dispersed all around the world. Let’s bring them home.”

But by far the most adamant statement came from Dempsey. “I didn’t become the chairman of the Joint Chiefs to oversee the decline of the Armed Forces of the United States, and an end state that would have this nation and its military not be a global power,” he said. “That is not who we are as a nation.”

Either the United States rules the world or Americans are no longer Americans? Happily, that’s not the choice the 113th Congress faces. The decision at hand concerns limits, not some kind of national, existential apocalypse. Force requires bounds. Between militarism and pacifism lie diplomacy, accountability, and restraint. Dempsey’s won’t be the last word. ♦

[\*](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2013/01/28/130128crat_atlarge_lepore?printable=true#correctionasterisk1)A redistricting of California’s Twenty-fifth Congressional District went into effect in January, 2013. The district no longer includes a naval weapons station, Army fort, or a Marine mountain-warfare training center.

[\*](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2013/01/28/130128crat_atlarge_lepore?printable=true#correctionasterisk2)Walter B. Jones is a Republican, not a Democrat, as originally stated.

[\*](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2013/01/28/130128crat_atlarge_lepore?printable=true#correctionasterisk3)Executives from the Lockheed Corporation appeared at the hearings and before a Senate Committee. They were not from Lockheed Martin, as originally stated; the Lockheed Corporation became Lockheed Martin in 1995.

[\*](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2013/01/28/130128crat_atlarge_lepore?printable=true#correctionasterisk4)The original article stated that Andrew Bacevich, Jr., served in the U.S. Army’s Third Battalion, but there are multiple Third Battalions in the U.S. Army.