

Still another argument for reducing the American nuclear arsenal is that in leading by example, Washington would promote global nonproliferation. Kroenig's short answer: "Keep dreaming." The United States has been cutting its nuclear forces since the 1960s, and there's no evidence that these efforts have reduced worldwide proliferation. Indeed, Kroenig notes, the pathbreaking 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons was ratified at a peak moment of U.S. nuclear capacity.

Shrinking the arsenal isn't even cost effective, Kroenig contends. Most of the cost is in the infrastructure, not the weapons themselves, and nuclear programs make up only four percent of the U.S. defense budget. Demilitarizing bombs and weapon-building facilities would cost billions. It's true that the United States could save approximately \$3.9 billion annually by delaying the modernization of missiles and other delivery vehicles, but that's "nothing short of trivial" compared to the \$600 billion spent on defense each year. And the compelling rationale that fostered the U.S. nuclear buildup in the 1950s still applies today: Nuclear weapons are a much cheaper form of deterrence than conventional armies.

There is a simple principle at the bottom of Kroenig's argument: "The more

devastating that adversaries find the prospect of nuclear war, the less likely they will be to start trouble." He thinks the Obama administration ought to abandon its talk of further reducing the nuclear weapons count and "follow through on its promise to fully modernize U.S. nuclear infrastructure." ■

DON'T WORRY, BE HAPPY

THE SOURCE: "Defense on a Diet" by Melvyn P. Leffler, in *Foreign Affairs*, Nov.–Dec. 2013.

A LOOMING NEW AGE OF AUSTERITY IN defense is causing great anxiety in Washington. "We have to remember the lessons of history," President Barack Obama declared in 2012. "We can't afford to repeat the mistakes that have been made in the past—after World War II, after Vietnam—when our military policy was left ill prepared for the future."

What mistakes? asks Melvyn P. Leffler, a University of Virginia historian. "History shows us that austerity can help, rather than hurt," he writes in *Foreign Affairs*. Reduced defense spending usually concentrates the minds of decision makers, forcing them to think more creatively and realistically about strategy. For the most part, the consequences of past cuts

Nixon's opening to China was a product of austerity in defense.

in Pentagon spending were good.

The classic cautionary tale about austerity is America's deep defense cutbacks after World War I, when military spending suddenly dropped from 17 percent of gross domestic product to two percent, and the Army shrank by 96 percent. But "generations of dispassionate scholarship" since Pearl Harbor, Leffler writes, have shown that austerity "neither compromised U.S. security nor thwarted significant technological innovation." Rather, "what left the United States unprepared for the gathering storm was a flawed threat perception and inept diplomacy."

As the likelihood of war rose in 1940, U.S. policymakers scrambled to devise a strategy suited to their scant resources until America could fully mobilize. They came up with a good one: prevent Germany from invading Britain, dominating the Atlantic sea lanes, and incorporating northwestern Europe's resources into the Nazi war machine. Everything else was secondary.

After the war, President Harry S. Truman and his Republican opponents

were united in their eagerness to balance the budget and fight inflation; this rare confluence of interests ensured another round of deep defense cuts. Truman and his top advisers reckoned that the Soviets were too weak to fight a war but could make inroads by other means in many war-ravaged countries around the world. Foreign assistance, they decided, "was more important than rearmament." Their strategy led to the Marshall Plan and the reconstruction of Europe.

The emphasis shifted again after North Korea's surprise 1950 invasion of South Korea, and U.S. defense outlays tripled in only three years. But "only a tiny percentage" of that money was needed for the war in South Korea, according to Leffler. Most of it was devoted to preparing the U.S. military for confrontation with the Soviets around the world.

Leffler concedes that austerity hasn't always led to the best outcomes. President Dwight D. Eisenhower was determined to restrain Pentagon spending but also embraced a wide range of U.S. alliances and commitments around the world. During Eisenhower's second term (1957–61), the gap between means and ends grew wider, and as a result, U.S. military spending increased rapidly.

That was not the only period in which America's commitments and ambitions

abroad outweighed the resources it was willing to devote to them, but even such imbalances can produce favorable results. After the Vietnam War, President Richard M. Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were faced with a Congress insistent upon reduced military spending, so they devised creative responses to check Soviet expansion, including détente with Moscow, the initiation of relations with China, and a welter of covert actions and regional alliances. After the Gulf War of 1990–91, however, the administration of George H. W. Bush called for retrenchment but also insisted on ambitious foreign-policy goals, with the result that the level of military spending remained high.

Overall, Leffler concludes, “the negative consequences of defense austerity have been exaggerated.” The significant problems that did arise under tighter budgets “were rarely, or only partly, the result of austerity itself. . . . The country’s worst military problems of the post–World War II era—China’s intervention in the Korean War, the quagmire in Vietnam, the morass in Iraq—had nothing to do with tight budgets.”

The key to prospering in a time of defense austerity is “an artful combination of initiatives to reassure allies and engage adversaries.” And the challenge,

Leffler notes, is not all that great. U.S. defense spending will not be slashed but only reduced slightly, or it might simply grow more slowly than before. In any case, the United States will still spend “more on its military than all its geopolitical competitors combined.” ■

THE CONSERVATIVE CASE AGAINST WAR

THE SOURCE: “Warfare State to Welfare State” by Ivan Eland, in *The Independent Review*, Fall 2013.

AN ISOLATIONIST, ANTIWAR STREAK RUNS through U.S. political history, and its standard-bearers have often been conservatives. Before the attack on Pearl Harbor, for example, Republicans frequently criticized President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s support for Britain’s war effort.

But the Cold War, and President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s commitment to “contain” the Soviet Union, transformed the Right. Combating the communist menace in the international arena became a bipartisan affair, and most conservatives, led by *National Review* founder William F. Buckley, championed an aggressive foreign policy even as they advocated smaller government.

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