

Congress, bordering on uselessness, appears incapable of solving major issues facing America. The latest Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll, published July 24, indicated 83 percent of the public – the highest ever for this poll – disapprove of the partisan gridlock on Capitol Hill. While it dallies on improving job opportunities, tax reform, cutting unnecessary spending, immigration reform, effectively funding Social Security and Medicare, plus a plethora of other important issues, Congress sharpens its knives to whittle down the defense budget. This is long overdue if sensibly approached. ___PUBLIC___ The United States is the world's sole superpower and faces daunting challenges in meeting its global military commitments, many extending back to the Cold War and World War II. We are spending more to maintain those commitments at the same time the U.S. share of global manufacturing and GDP [measure of all services and goods produced by a country in one year] is smaller than in 1945. We're not getting the bang for the buck as we face becoming an overstretched, declining hegemon such as Spain in the 16th century, Holland in the 17th, France in 18th and Great Britain in 19th before passing the torch of number one world power to the U.S. after 1945. Paul Kennedy wrote of the "imperial overstretch" dilemma facing America in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*: "A low investment in armaments may, for a globally overstretched power like the United States, leave it feeling vulnerable everywhere; but a very heavy investment in armaments, while bringing greater security in the short term, may so erode the commercial competitiveness of the American economy that the nation will be less secure in the long term."

For it has been a common dilemma facing previous 'number one' countries that even as their relative economic strength is ebbing, the growing foreign challenges to their position have compelled them to allocate more and more of their resources into the military sector, which in turn squeezes out productive investment and, over time, leads to the downward spiral of slower growth, heavier taxes, deepening domestic splits over spending priorities, and a weakening capacity to bear the burdens of defense."

Kennedy places the onus of leadership on Congress and a thoughtful executive branch: "The task facing American statesmen over the next decades, therefore, is to recognize that broad trends are underway, and that there is a need to 'manage' affairs so that the relative erosion of the United States' position takes place slowly and smoothly, and is not accelerated by policies which bring merely short-term advantage but longer-term disadvantage. This involves, from the president's office downward, an appreciation that technological and therefore socioeconomic change is occurring in the world faster than ever before; that the international community is much more politically and culturally diverse than has been assumed, and is defiant of simplistic remedies; that the economic and productive balances are no longer as favorably tilted in the United States' direction as in 1945; and that, even in the military realm, there are signs of a certain redistribution of the balances...in which the conglomeration of American economic-cum-military strength is likely to remain larger than that possessed by any one of the others individually, but will not be as disproportionate as in the decades which immediately followed the Second World War."

The pattern of history is against the United States preserving its existing position, "for it simply has not been given to any one society to remain permanently ahead of all others." One is tempted to paraphrase George Bernard Shaw's deadly serious quip about Great Britain: "Rome fell; Babylon fell; Scarsdale's turn will come." On the other hand, "this reference to historical precedents does not imply that the United States is destined to shrink to the relative obscurity of

former leading powers such as Spain or the Netherlands, or to disintegrate like the Roman and Austro-Hungarian empires; it is simply too large to do the former, and presumably too homogeneous to do the latter.”

Now that the U.S. seems to have a respite from the obscurity of the historical trash can, how much do we spend on maintaining the military force necessary to keep the oceans unobstructed as our global, maritime economy struggles to leave behind the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression and, hopefully, thrive? In the late 1880s, American strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan characterized naval power as “more silent than the clash of arms....” and that “Organized force alone enables the quiet and the weak to go about their business and to sleep securely in their beds, safe from the violent without or within.”

Theodore Roosevelt, a young visiting lecturer at the Naval College, listened to Mahan and, as president, transformed the U.S. Navy into the global force that has underpinned international security and prosperity for a century. Indeed, TR’s sending the Great White Fleet, 16 battleships with hulls painted a stark white, around the globe from December 1907 until February 1909, emphasized America’s new foreign policy: “Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far.”

The United States has gone far. But in an era of economic recovery where every dollar should be carefully spent, how much fat can be cut from the defense budget, and how can those reduced expenditures be more wisely appropriated? American international commitments are growing, not shrinking, yet our sticks are getting smaller and smaller. Admiral Mike Mullen, as 17th chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2007-2011, called military spending at four percent of GDP the “absolute floor.” Military spending during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations was 10 percent and 9 percent of GDP, respectively. Since 2000, the military budget has fluctuated between 3.4 to 5 percent of GDP. By comparison, North Korea spends 33.9 percent of its GDP on defense, Israel 8.8 percent, and China 1.3 percent in the world’s second largest economy. President Obama requested \$613.9 billion for the 2013 defense budget, but failure to avoid sequestration may force Congress to cut defense by \$600 billion over the next decade. In the midst of this political and strategic ineptitude – China lurks in the background. Indeed, its communist leaders have vowed to supplant the United States as the world’s foremost military power by 2050. This should be an alarming wake-up call for complacent Americans. A March to May 2013 Pew Research Center poll in 39 countries showed 33 percent believed China would eventually surpass the U.S. as the leading superpower; 33 percent responded “Never;” and 13 percent avowed China “has already” supplanted America.

Worldwide military spending is “staggering,” according to the CIA World Factbook -- \$1.3 trillion annually – 2.5 percent of the world’s \$49 trillion GDP – with the U.S. accounting for nearly half. China has the second largest military budget, increasing 10.7 percent from 2012 to \$119 billion for 2013. Seth Cropsey, a former assistant secretary of the Navy, has written a timely new book, *Mayday: The Decline of American Naval Supremacy*. He declared the nation’s naval power is its first line of defense, but lamented the number of ships has declined from nearly 600 at the end of the Reagan years, to below 300 today. The number of hulls may bottom out at between 150 and 200, leaving the U.S. vulnerable to a growing Chinese maritime capability. Cropsey suggests Congress, the White House and Pentagon reinvent the Navy into a more streamlined force to accomplish the same expansive goals with less. For example, instead of building more big-deck aircraft carriers at \$13 billion apiece, cut the current fleet from 11 to 6 or 8 and build 18 smaller carriers. The concept of less cost and greater efficiency is not contradictory. While the Navy is smaller than a century ago, lawmakers need to find the correct correlation between

policy, strategy and means. Our leaders need to make decisions based on strategic thinking and not let dollars and cents drive the process. The question remains – is our leadership capable – or is Pax Americana spiraling downward as the next 100 years becomes the Chinese Century?