

WHY NOT CHICKEN-FAT?

By MICHAEL VENTURA

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Republicans love to shovel money toward the Pentagon, but they love oil more. They'll give our military anything it wants – except biofuel.

The New York Times online, Aug. 27:

This summer, the Navy “put a Pacific fleet on maneuvers on ... biofuels ... [made from] algae or chicken fat. ‘It works in the engines that we have, it works in the aircraft that we have, it works in the ships that we have,’ said Ray Mabus, secretary of the Navy.”

Republicans threw fits.

“You’re not the secretary of energy, you’re secretary of the Navy,” scolded Rep. Randy Forbes [R-Va]. Rep. Mike Conaway [R-TX] “introduced House legislation that would limit [the military’s] biofuel purchasing.” Mitt Romney “signaled” that military use of biofuels “would not be a priority in his administration.”

If the military became a biofuel consumer it would jumpstart that industry, allow biofuel to compete with Big Oil, and diminish the strategic importance of Big Oil’s pals in the Middle East. (And imagine every diesel truck and train running on chicken fat!) But Big Oil practically funds the Republican Party, so, in this case, national security and energy independence are not Republican priorities.

It’s always fun when the GOP unmasks its real loyalties.

Keep that revealing incident in mind as we proceed.

The U.S. military budget is a marvel of marvels. Even reliable news sources can’t agree on its size.

In *The New York Times* online, Carol Giacomo wrote that “the bass budget for 2012 – not including war-related costs – is projected at \$525 billion, up roughly 34 percent from 2001” (Aug. 25), while former Reagan budget director David A. Stockman put it at \$775 billion (Aug. 13).

Then there’s this: “Between 2001 and 2009, the defense budget rose by 70 percent, to \$699 billion. Even adjusted for inflation, the U.S. is now spending more on defense than it did during the height of the Cold War (*The Washington Post*, quoted in *The Week*, Aug. 19-26, 2011, p.19 – italics in original).”

Those numbers don’t include the “more than \$50 billion in 2012... [for] spy and intelligence agencies” (*The Wall Street Journal*, Aug.18-19, p.C3). That, in turn, probably doesn’t include clandestine operations that are very expensive and are the Obama administration’s tactic-of-choice for trouble spots around the world.

But this, at least, everyone agrees on:

“The United States invests more in its military manpower and hardware than all other countries combined. ... The Government Accountability office reports that since the end of the Cold War, funding for weapons acquisition has increased by 57 percent (*Foreign Affairs*, Nov./Dec., 2011, pp.34-35).”

None of these estimates include the cost of 260,000 “private workers” that the Pentagon and the State Department have employed in Iraq and Afghanistan (*The New York Times*, Sept. 18, 2011, p.SR12). Also not included are the “contractors” that the Obama administration sends to places like Somalia (*The New York Times*, Aug. 11, 2011, p.1).

That report describes a cute set-up:

An outfit called Bancroft Global Development employs the “contractors” (who resent being called “mercenaries”). “The company’s real income comes from the United States government, albeit circuitously. The governments of Uganda and Burundi pay Bancroft millions of dollars ... that [our] State Department then reimburses” (*The New York Times*, Aug. 11, 2011, p.1).

You can see it’s tough to even roughly estimate what the United States military budget really and truly is. It’s possible no one knows for sure.

For instance, as of 2010 the U.S. had 16 intelligence agencies (*The New York Times*, Dec. 15, 2010, p.1). That’s right, 16 -- and I can’t name them all either. At least one more has been established this year, the “new Defense Clandestine Service” (Associated Press online, April 23).

So let’s see: the military services, plus the contractors, plus at least 17 intelligence agencies, plus who knows what? That is why it’s very possible that no one in Washington or anywhere else can quote a reliably exact number for our total “defense” budget.

One trillion dollars a year for the entire shebang seems a reasonable estimate, give or a take a hundred billion.

Does this appear to you, as it does to me, an utterly out-of-control orgy of spending disproportionate to any conceivable threat?

The Obama administration has been overpraised by some and overdamned by many for announcing a military spending cut of roughly \$33 billion a year (*The New York Times*, July 15, 2011, p.23).

What is that, less than 2% of a trillion?

A trillion minus 2% still sounds awfully like a trillion.

And Mitt Romney promises that if elected he will increase that budget “dramatically” (*The Economist*, Aug. 25, p.9).

Now we come to why I’ve blasted all these numbers onto the page.

The New York Times employs columnist David Brooks as its resident conservative. Brooks presents himself as conservatism’s sane, reasonable, and honest voice. This summer he wrote two columns to explain the GOP’s vision and Romney’s proposals: “What Republicans Think” (June 15) and “Guide for the Perplexed” (Aug 20).

Those columns feature statements like these:

“[T]he welfare-state model is in its death throes.” “The safety net is so expensive it won’t be there for future generations.” “The biggest threat to national dynamism is spending money on the wrong things.” “Entitlement spending is crowding out spending on investments in our children and infrastructure.”

Brooks never mentions military spending. He writes as though our massive military expenditure plays no part in our economic dilemmas. Rather, Brooks blithely assumes that the present level of military spending is a permanent expense of being the United States of America.

Save for the occasional gadfly, like Ron Paul, almost all elected Republicans and many elected Democrats agree with Brooks.

The real political question is: Who benefits?

Who benefits from a military and military-related spending that eats up roughly \$1 trillion a year? Who benefits from spending more on the military today than we did during the Cold War?

When so-called “entitlements” are widely discussed as our only economic problem, who benefits and who gets hurt?

Believe it or not, the United States is still a rich country. “Metropolitan New York’s economy is roughly the size of Spain’s. Greater Los Angeles has a larger economy than Switzerland, while the economy of greater Boston is bigger than that of Greece (*The Wall Street Journal*, cited in *The Week*, Aug. 3, p.35).”

Politicians say we’re broke, but we’re clearly not. We’ve got the money to save Social Security, Medicare, the infrastructure, you name it. We’ve got the money for a jobs program that could recreate the middle class and empower common working people while keeping military spending at, say, Cold War levels.

So: Who benefits from keeping that money in the military budget and out of our on-the-ground economy?

That is the most important political question of our time.

The answer to that question is the answer to this question:

Why are Republicans furious at the Navy for successfully operating a fleet on biofuels made from algae and chicken fat?