

Republican Perspective (12 March 2014)

By Christopher Panton

Send in the Clowns

Any similarity between this column and George Will's syndicated column in the March 5 edition of the Contra Costa Times is nothing more than an erudite coincidence.

The American media often refer to the United States as a "super-power." This is by no means a self-appointed position because the term turns up with some regularity in the world press, suggesting authenticity - even though the context is not always complimentary. The domestic media also refer to the United States as a "leader." This appellation is consistent with the super-power concept. And there is one stand-out dimension that should, and rightfully does, rank high in the pantheon of necessary attributes of a leader and of a super-power. Namely, its military.

During the 20th century, funding the U.S. military became controversial as greater demands for the funding of social programs were made on the federal budget. A brief historical trip around the Internet on the vagaries of U.S. military expenditures will give you a strong sense of the feast or famine patterns. And against that back-drop, here we go again.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel recently announced cuts in U.S. military spending that would reduce army strength to about where it was pre-World War II. He attempted to soften this proposed blow by depicting the army of the future as smaller and more flexibly designed for fighting terrorism, backed up by wunderkind high tech cyber-what-nots. Disingenuous in the extreme. We already have small, flexible units and our high tech is already much bigger than their high tech - whoever they are. It is to Hagel's great shame that he couldn't be honest and say that the administration is taking a broader approach and cutting the, allegedly considerable, fat - not the manpower - out of the military budget. But no. There would be way too many gored oxen for this cowardly administration to take on.

Could it be, then, that there is some other devious reason for restraining military expenditures at this time? Of course there is, because of the age-old dilemma created by the competition between spending on the military and spending on social programs. However, in this case, the proposed cuts could certainly be viewed as inevitable because the war in Afghanistan will be winding down, even though many expenditures specific to the war are "one time only" off-budget. But there is also the shadowy presence of two other intrusive motives: One, it's an election year and two, Obamacare. The former is a no-brainer; all election year budgets endeavor to enhance the giveaways and feel-goods at the expense of other items.

But, nobody really knows how much Obamacare is going to cost. The earliest, speculative numbers are, by definition, wickedly understated in order to fulfill their mission as a fundamental plank in the sales pitch. It is a pious hope that the costs incurred by the Keystone Kops launch of Obamacare have now given the administration a reflective pause. As a harbinger, they should be a powerful enough stimulant to drive the administration's propagandists back to their

abaci. There, they will almost certainly find that closer-to-the-truth costs of bringing superior health care to just about everyone in the United States will be well above pant-wetting levels. Red alert: what to do, what to do? Hey, let's start a slush fund by chipping away at some non-essentials and keep it going for the next few years. Hmm, I wonder what the main "non-essential" target could be?

As I suggested in a previous column, the United States' military's main business is peace. This is achieved by protecting our shores, as well as going into messy places, often in a big way, to try to sort things out. Are we really going to handle the big jobs with small units, however technical? Extrapolating this philosophy means that, eventually, we will have insufficient resources to send in to do the big jobs. Who, then, will be sent in to do them? Send in China (as the new leader)? How about sending in the United Nations (sans the United States and, therefore, a rabble of numerous small units from dozens of countries)? Or send in Iran (it has maniacal, religiously-driven ambitions), or Russia (yeah, great), or North Korea (they have a massive army). Send in the clowns?

The United States' military is the world's Peace Insurance. It's there, just in case. I think it was John Milton who said, "They also serve who only stand and wait." So, given the choice between Obamacare and Peacecare, in which direction do you really think that the balance should be tipped? And assuming that an optimum balance can be struck, its impact will be wasted if the administration's incompetent handling of Obamacare carries over to Peacecare. Perhaps the Ukraine will be the Administration's Peacecare Waterloo. Will Obama become Napoleon or Wellington? Or will we have to send in the clowns?