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Focus The Pentagon On Warfighting, Not Kids' Schools And Such

By MARK CANCIAN and MITCHELL CANCIAN on February 21, 2017 at 4:01 AM

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It's time to focus the Pentagon on warfighting and get it out of the myriad auxiliary activities that distract it from its main purpose. Secretary Mattis made his position clear in his confirmation hearing: "[W]e have to stay focused on a military that is so lethal that on the battle field it will be the enemy's longest day and worst day when they run into that force." That commitment, combined with [President Trump's focus on management efficiencies](#) and willingness to disrupt long-standing practices, opens a window of opportunity.

Many commentators have criticized the extensive skein of activities the military does that have nothing to do with fighting, but few get beyond the rhetorical stage. It's hard. Refocusing the Pentagon and reducing support activities involves painful trade-offs and offending powerful interest groups. Those activities exist for a reason and boast passionate supporters.

Nevertheless, the time is ripe to consider major changes that have been discussed for years. To get a sense of the possibilities, let's take a look at some options:



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Close unneeded bases ([Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), [Center for New American Security](#), [Cato Institute](#), and many others have suggested another round of BRAC). Fewer bases means fewer military personnel doing support activities (and fewer civilians overall). Another round of closures would save an estimated \$2 billion to \$3 billion per year, once fully implemented. The mechanics are easy. It is been done five times in the past; there is a clear

process, an [established need](#), and a track record of actual savings. However, Congress — eager to protect local communities and concerned about future force expansion — refused the Obama administration’s base closure proposals for the last four years running. Senator McCain, Rep. Adam Smith and others recently have signaled a willingness to consider base closures. The Pentagon should move aggressively to take advantage of the opening. This is the easiest and proven way to cut unneeded overhead. If you are not willing to do BRAC, you might as well stop thinking about savings.

Stop medical research unrelated to war fighting (as [Senator McCain](#) has argued). Because the Defense Department has deep pockets, [Congress has charged it with doing medical research](#) on a wide variety of conditions from breast cancer, to autism, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease. [Collectively, this research costs about a billion dollars per year](#). These are real research needs but they are unrelated to war fighting. The research should be conducted by other parts of the federal government, for example, by the National Institutes of Health. Advocates will oppose any effort to shift funding, fearful it might be reduced in the process.



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Align the military medical community with wartime requirements (as the [Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission](#) (MCRMC) and [Heritage](#) have argued). This would greatly reduce its size, focus it on wartime missions, and allow the Defense Department to use less expensive civilian medical facilities for peacetime needs. Currently, [the military medical community is focused on peacetime operations](#) and is much larger than, and badly aligned with, wartime requirements. For example, the Army has 232 pediatricians but a wartime requirement for one. The MCRMC argued that this peacetime focus impaired the ability to handle wartime trauma—the treatment of which is why the military medical

establishment exists. [Military facilities are also more expensive than their civilian counterparts](#). The good news is that the Congress recently authorized DoD to convert some jobs from military to civilian. The bad news is that realignment still won't be easy. Many service members, and retirees as well, would regard a shift to civilian facilities as a cut in benefits.

Get military personnel out of commercially available activities (see the [Simpson-Bowles Commission](#) and the [Defense Business Board](#)). Military personnel are extremely expensive, difficult to recruit, and hard to retain. As a result, they should be used only for those tasks that must be done by the military. Other tasks should be [done by either civilian employees of the government](#) or contractors, both of whom are easier to recruit and (generally) less expensive when all of the support costs are considered. Nevertheless, [about 350,000 active duty military personnel are in commercial-type, support activities](#)—photographers, IT personnel, accountants, facility maintenance, and the like. Richard Danzig, former Navy Secretary, called this a “[conscription mentality](#)” that regards military personnel as “free” and plentiful, when they are, in fact, expensive and scarce. Getting them out of support activities and into war fighting would put them where they are needed most. However, the shift would also increase the number of government employees and contractors, both of which the Congress and the administration want to cut. The Pentagon can't shift functions to civilians and then cut the civilians. That just hollows the force.

Focus Combatant Commanders on warfighting and get them out of program and budget issues (see the [Defense Business Board](#)). The commanders were originally created to fight wars, but over the years they have become mini-Pentagons, with staffs that cover the full spectrum of administrative activities. For example, all of them have an office to assess the service and agency budgets and whether those are adequate for the needs of the combatant command. Eliminating these offices would not eliminate many billets, a few hundred across the 10 combatant commands, but they are highly graded billets, often at the major or lieutenant colonel level. The downside, however, is that the Secretary and the Congress have to stop asking combatant commanders about service and agency budgets. It's not fair to ask commanders about these topics and then to deny them the staff needed to provide a credible answer.



Stop running a school system for dependents (Simpson-Bowles Commission). No company in the world runs its own school system, but the military does, both overseas and at home, at the cost of \$2 billion per year. The need for an “American” school system overseas is well accepted, but the need for 58 DoD schools at home has faded with time. The system was originally developed to provide schooling for children in remote locations where there was no nearby civilian community. In the 1950s and 1960s DOD expanded its school system in the South because it refused to send its children to segregated schools. Both were the right thing to do at the time, but those days are long past. The military should send its children to the local schools. Closing DoD schools will not be easy, however. Proponents will note the value in having a school system where everyone comes from the same background of frequent transfers and parental deployments. A lot of parent-teacher associations will send the Defense Secretary angry letters.

The list of changes needed could go on and on, but the bottom line is clear. There are real opportunities to realign functions and focus on warfighting, but the notion of “low hanging fruit” is an illusion. The greater the change, and the larger the savings, the stronger the opposition. To get results, therefore, an administration must invest political capital.

Despite these difficulties, there are good reasons to refocus the Defense Department. Distraction by support activities induces confusion about the institution’s purpose, which is simply to fight and win wars. Savings, though not the primary purpose, could be large and could be applied to underfunded warfighting programs. Finally, as the Trump administration begins what promises to be a significant defense buildup, it needs to assure the American people that it is spending taxpayers dollars wisely. Focusing on warfighting is one way to do that.

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