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When the conversation about achieving budget savings within the Pentagon started gaining momentum about a year ago, there was no disagreement on the value of identifying efficiencies and redirecting dollars to modernization and development - where funding is needed most. The annual defense budget is by no means exempt from the spending debate, but Congress and the administration must exercise a certain degree of caution when agreeing to any cuts without first considering their implication.

The renewed focus on finding budget savings and efficiencies is necessary and long overdue. For defense, the budget is not sacrosanct. It can be cut smartly and quickly, though that does not mean pursuing spending cuts that directly undermine our military and threaten the core capability of each service branch against current and future threat assessments. But this is exactly the case with the Marine Corps Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle (EFV), which Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates recently recommended for termination as part of more than \$178 billion in proposed budget cuts.

The EFV is all about maintaining the core competency of the Marine Corps: getting Marines from ship to shore. This is the trademark mission of the Marine Corps, differentiating it from the other service branches and defining it as both a land and sea force that is capable of undertaking any mission. Throughout history, the Marines have always been at the tip of the spear, leading our nation and military in combat, and much of the Corps' history centers on its unique amphibious assault capability.

The Marine Corps last used amphibious vehicles in Lebanon for humanitarian reasons in 2006, while much of its attention was fixated on combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although there has not been a full-on beach assault in quite some time, there is a strong likelihood that the ability to put large numbers of Marines on shore efficiently will be needed once again in a conventional setting. Even with China and North Korea modernizing militarily, there is a mindset emerging within the Pentagon that amphibious assaults are a thing of the past, just as these same critics consider the need to bolster domestic ship production equally unnecessary.

Talk about misguided viewpoints. These same perspectives also contradict the findings of the bipartisan Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel and its report, which states, among

other things, that we are underfunding the military in key areas and failing to prepare for an array of threats on the horizon. Within that context, the Marine Corps holds in its inventory 31 amphibious ships designed to carry Amphibious Assault Vehicles (AAV) - the outdated vehicle the EFV is aiming to replace. The absolute minimum number of ships needed by the Marine Corps to maintain a base-line threshold for limited amphibious operations is 33, putting the Marines two ships below this benchmark.

So it makes sense why the Marine Corps has been such a strong defender of the EFV and strengthening its core competency against the backdrop of emerging conventional threats. The critical nature of the EFV was echoed in committee hearings and meetings at all levels. Only when Mr. Gates announced his proposal for \$178 billion in budget cuts did the Marine Corps suddenly agree with the decision to cancel the EFV, but in doing so, it expressed support to pursue costly upgrades within existing inventories.

The Marine Corps' mission has not changed. Exactly what did is hard to tell. Perhaps it involved the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" compromise, or maybe it's just another example of what happens when legitimate items get too far immersed in bureaucratic red tape and resistance. What the Marine Corps acknowledges is the importance of maintaining robust amphibious capability that puts riflemen onshore quickly and safely. The best choice - for factors related to speed, range and protection - is the EFV, hands down.

Preserving the EFV and ensuring that the production line remains open will be no easy task, but support is growing within Congress and the House Armed Services Committee in particular. Because Congress creates the budget each year, it must consider all of Mr. Gates' proposals closely. Some of them are agreeable and likely will receive strong bipartisan support. Eliminating the EFV altogether, however, would be a mistake and likely would receive outright opposition on multiple fronts.

In preparation for the debate on this and other budget items, I am preparing an alternative list of budget cuts that, in addition to achieving more efficiency, allow our military - including the Marine Corps - to stay focused on modernization. There are plenty of areas within defense to cut spending, most of it with the purpose of smartly reinvesting in systems that protect American security interests and guarantee sufficient force projection.

The EFV is a good example of what not to cut from the budget. Whether Congress funds the EFV in part or in its entirety will depend on what happens during the budget cycle. Regardless

of the outcome, we cannot lose sight of the multiple threats we face and the importance of ensuring each service branch, specific to its mission, maintains basic core capability.

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