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Each of America's military service branches provides a unique core capability that, when integrated with the rest of the force structure, creates a cohesive fighting force with significant technological and tactical advantages. The Army is land-based, specializing in certain aspects of ground combat. The Air Force protects the skies and the Navy the sea. For the Marine Corps, its expertise is amphibious assault operations – transporting Marines from ship to shore.

This might soon change, with the Marine Corps standing to lose its core competency under the direction of Defense Secretary Robert Gates. In recommending nearly \$178 billion in defense budget cuts and efficiencies, Gates proposed terminating the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle (EFV), the next generation of amphibious vehicle.

For more than 15 years, the Marine Corps and the Department of Defense have been funding development of the EFV and emphasizing the need to improve amphibious capability. The existing Amphibious Assault Vehicle is outdated and increasingly unreliable. The EFV, for factors related to speed, range and protection, constitutes a much-needed investment in the future of the Marine Corps.

Gen. James Conway, former commandant of the Marine Corps, said in 2009 that the capability provided by the EFV is "what the nation really needs." Gen. George Flynn called the EFV "essential to national security" and said no alternatives are available to "provide equal or greater military capability at a reduced cost." In 2010, Marine Maj. Carl Redding called the EFV the corps' "number one ground acquisition priority." And, only months ago, a Marine Corps spokesman unequivocally stated, "our position remains that the nation needs the capability inherent in the EFV."

The history and tradition of the Marine Corps is built on its unique amphibious mission. The unmatched ability to launch an amphibious assault is what helped Marines advance past beachheads in the South Pacific during World War II and later in Korea. It's also because of this capability that, over the last two decades alone, the Marine Corps has effectively coordinated more than 110 amphibious operations worldwide, many of which involved disaster relief and noncombatant evacuations. One of the more recent amphibious operations was in 2006, when Marines assisted with the evacuation of American citizens from Beirut as tensions escalated

between Lebanon and Israel.

Combat in Iraq and Afghanistan forced the Marine Corps to refocus part of its mission, directing attention to battlefields ranging from streets to deserts to mountains. Even so, the prevailing opinion within the Marine Corps leadership is that amphibious capability is a necessity for both U.S. global security and the future of the Marines as a viable land and sea force. The major difference of opinion now appears to be whether the EFV or costly upgrades to the existing inventory are best. Credit this to Gates' recommendation to terminate the EFV, which received the sudden and unexpected endorsement of Marine Corps leadership in recent weeks – much of it the same leadership that has been clamoring for the EFV and calling it a top priority.

What changed? The Marine Corps mission did not change, nor has the current threat assessment that identifies conventional military threats on the horizon. There are multiple theories about why EFV was recommended for termination. Some suggest the decision was retaliation by Gates for the Marine Corps' opposition to overturning the "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Others suggest a choice was offered between the EFV and the F-35 variant – a decision better left to the House Armed Services Committee and the rest of Congress as part of the budget process. Perhaps it was a bureaucratic decision within the Defense Department, deceptively resold as a budget efficiency choice.

Regardless, the EFV has been recommended for termination. Many of Gates' proposals are legitimate and stand to receive strong bipartisan support. But the EFV is one program Congress cannot be so quick to cut.

The defense budget is not sacrosanct. But that does not mean pursuing spending cuts that undermine our military. I am preparing an alternative list of defense budget efficiencies that, in addition to achieving much-needed cost savings, allow the military, including the Marine Corps, to stay focused on modernization.

Whatever action Congress takes on the EFV will depend on what happens during the budget cycle. Outcome aside, we cannot lose sight of the multiple threats we face and the importance of ensuring that each service branch maintains basic core capability.