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In American politics, each election always seems to be of greater importance than the last. There's a lot riding on what happens on Nov. 6, but for the future of America's military and U.S. national security, the stakes are as high as they have ever been.

Interwoven with the national economic debate, and at times even superseding the foreign policy discussion during the third and final presidential debate, there has been a lot of talk about America's \$16 trillion debt and what it means for the future. The consequences of growing debt levels and poor fiscal management through decades of leadership are being felt all around, but perhaps the biggest threat of all is the disastrous outlook for America's military should the budget ax fall and disproportionately cut defense spending at a time of global unrest.

The bottom line is that the Budget Control Act (BCA), while averting a government shutdown last summer, was a bad deal for national security. Often overlooked is that as soon as the president signed the BCA, more than \$450 billion in defense budget reductions went into effect — right out of the starting gate. Not to be confused with sequestration, those cuts were viewed by top brass and the military's civilian leadership as the most the Pentagon could swallow without harming readiness and the high operation tempo that has become the new norm in the post-Sept. 11 world.

If triggered, sequestration will add another \$500 billion in defense cuts on top of the \$450 billion already in the pipeline, for a total of nearly \$1 trillion in budget reductions over the next 10 years. Calls to protect the military budget from sequestration have grown louder and more forceful. In major military communities like San Diego and Norfolk, among others, it's not just an issue of security, it's also an issue of jobs.

In one breath, the president as commander in chief has suggested that he's fine with cutting to the bone the same military that has prevented attacks on American soil since Sept. 11, 2001, killed Osama bin Laden, decimated al Qaeda and continues to face down threats worldwide. It's been heard many times over from the president that a deal is a deal, referring to the BCA, and that America spends more on national defense than the next several nation-states combined, somehow attempting to justify disproportionate security cuts — as if the United States, unlike the rest of the world, doesn't face major threats on multiple fronts.

Meanwhile, when it was convenient on the debate stage, the president said, without any further explanation, that sequestration “will not happen.” That’s a first, coming from the president, following more than a year of contradictory statements and inaction, thus explaining why his latest prediction has received so much attention.

Going even further, the president went on to say that he’s not for reducing military spending but “maintaining it.” This statement might have been newsworthy, too, if only it were true. With the defense budget caps created under the BCA, effectively putting the budget process on autopilot and implementing deep cuts year after year, the idea that somehow the defense budget can be maintained right where it is today is nonsense. Moreover, as the president knows, doing so would be inconsistent with the law.

The president should listen to his own defense secretary, who said sequestration is the political equivalent of “shooting ourselves in the head.” Surely, Leon E. Panetta would not make such a strong statement, in addition to having his concerns echoed by military leadership across the board, if the intent is to “maintain” the defense budget.

More poorly received were the president’s comments about “horses and bayonets” and his statement about the size and composition of the U.S. Navy, when he said it’s “not a game of Battleship, where we’re counting ships. It’s what are our capabilities.” When sitting down with the secretary of the Navy and others, he proceeded to say, “we determine how we are going to be best able to meet all of our defense needs.”

This was the response to former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney’s statement about today’s 285-ship Navy, compared to the 313-ship fleet the Navy says it needs. In actuality, during a congressional hearing in March, the Navy for the first time on record acknowledged that to meet 100 percent of its requirements, it needs a fleet exceeding 500 ships. Of course, while meeting 100 percent of its requirements is an unattainable goal, it raises the point that our Navy is a long way from where it needs to be in both size and composition to fulfill its day-to-day forward-deployed mission. It also wasn’t long ago that the bipartisan Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel recommended a fleet of 346 ships.

One of the strongest signals of American strength is a U.S. Navy vessel off hostile or friendly shores. A smaller Navy, along with a smaller Marine Corps and Army, is a sure bet under

sequestration and constraining defense budgets. What this signals to our friends and foes alike is that we will no longer be capable of asserting our presence and protecting our spheres of influence to the extent that will be necessary in the 21st century.

History shows us how important a navy is to any nation that has ever commanded the seas. A navy projects military force and navigates trade routes. Maintaining a nation at its peak is dependent on its capability for patrolling the oceans. As navies fall, so do economies and vice versa. America is stronger because of our Navy and our ability to reach out and touch others, and the U.S. Navy will continue to dictate American power well into the future.

The Secretary of Defense and the uniformed leadership have it right when they say sequestration would decimate America's military. For any commander in chief, warnings like this cannot be ignored.