



## **Targeting the right defense savings**

**By Rep. Mike Coffman**

**Posted: 05/01/2011**

Last August, Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, "The single biggest threat to our national security is our debt."

When the admiral said that, our national debt was \$13.3 trillion. Today it is \$14.3 trillion. The threat keeps growing.

Obviously, something needs to be done. I have looked at spending reductions across the spectrum of the U.S. government budget. As a Marine Corps combat veteran, I believe that we also need to thoroughly scrutinize funding within the Department of Defense and increase efficiency, and eliminate redundant and ineffective programs and organizations.

Earlier this year, the Department of Defense modified its proposed budget to include \$24.3 billion in cuts and efficiencies to fiscal year 2012 spending. This will include a top-line reduction to their request by \$13 billion and a further \$11.3 billion in efficiencies that are redirected to higher priorities. The plan would save \$179.5 billion over five years. These proposals must now be acted upon by Congress.

After reviewing Defense Secretary Robert Gates' plans, I added another \$175 million in cuts to the proposal, and have requested the total package be considered by the House Armed Services Committee. Along with Gates' proposed plan, I also intend to prevent any efforts to add additional wasteful spending to the defense budget — specifically, to work to prevent \$420 million in spending next year on an alternative engine for the F-35 fighter jet and to work to prevent \$275 million in spending to continue the Marine Corps Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle.

It is important to recognize that this does not hobble our nation's fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, the plan is designed to remove funding from programs and organizations that were identified by the Department of Defense as redundant, inefficient and unnecessary, and reinvest \$11.3 billion in fiscal year 2012 in much-needed programs and projects for those serving on the front lines.

By reinvesting savings identified within the Department of Defense, many vital programs will receive more funding. For instance, the Marine Corps will use nearly \$1 billion of redirected funds to refurbish its armored ground vehicles in Afghanistan. Reinvested savings would also be used for innovative suicide-prevention and substance-abuse programs, as well as increasing the availability of unmanned aerial vehicles to enable our ground forces to prevent the proliferation of deadly improvised explosive devices (IEDs). These initiatives will have a direct positive impact on our service members conducting combat operations.

Secretary Gates also proposed a modest fee increase for TRICARE health insurance for military retirees, as well as future fee increases tied to a medical cost inflation index. Although I agree with the modest fee increase for fiscal year 2012, I believe the index he proposed for future fee increases is unfair to military retirees who have paid a high up-front cost for their health care through years of dedicated military service, typically including long periods of separation from their families. Accordingly, I have submitted a legislative proposal that includes a modest fee increase for 2012 but ties future fee increases to military retiree cost of living adjustments in order to avoid imposing unfair fee hikes on military veterans.

Despite the fact that the Pentagon supports these savings and efficiencies, it will be a tough fight to sell it in Congress. My personal experience in both the U.S. Army and Marine Corps gives me a unique perspective within the House Armed Services Committee. I came to Washington to reduce our nation's burdensome — and dangerous — debt through fiscal responsibility. I believe that my military experience gives me the perspective to identify savings, but not in an irresponsible fashion that would hurt our service members performing admirably in three active combat operations.