

CUTTING SOCIAL SECURITY IN THE NAME OF NATIONAL SECURITY

As a number of people have observed, the National Security Strategy Obama released last week prioritizes the economic vitality of the US as one source of security. Much of this discussion places a predictable focus on trade, technology, and education. But I was shocked by the almost mindless privileging on deficit reduction in the document.

For example, the overview paragraph that introduces the importance of our economic health puts reducing the deficit on par with education, science, energy, and health care.

At the center of our efforts is a commitment to renew our economy, which serves as the wellspring of American power. The American people are now emerging from the most devastating recession that we have faced since the Great Depression. As we continue to act to ensure that our recovery is broad and sustained, we are also laying the foundation for the long term growth of our economy and competitiveness of our citizens. The investments that we have made in recovery are a part of a broader effort that will contribute to our strength: by providing a quality education for our children; enhancing science and innovation; transforming our energy economy to power new jobs and industries; lowering the cost of health care for our people and businesses; and reducing the Federal deficit. [my emphasis]

The paragraph immediately following tries to connect all of these ideas directly with security. Yet its explanation for the importance

of deficit reduction is so vague as to be meaningless.

Each of these steps will sustain America's ability to lead in a world where economic power and individual opportunity are more diffuse. These efforts are also tied to our commitment to secure a more resilient nation. Our recovery includes rebuilding an infrastructure that will be more secure and reliable in the face of terrorist threats and natural disasters. Our focus on education and science can ensure that the breakthroughs of tomorrow take place in the United States. Our development of new sources of energy will reduce our dependence on foreign oil. Our commitment to deficit reduction will discipline us to make hard choices, and to avoid overreach. These steps complement our efforts to integrate homeland security with national security; including seamless coordination among Federal, state, and local governments to prevent, protect against, and respond to threats and natural disasters. [my emphasis]

We don't get any better explanation of the importance of deficit reduction in the paragraphs dedicated to economic issues later in the document. The NSS first claims that deficit reduction, along with an emphasis on savings and reforming our financial system, will be all that it takes to make the US economy more export-driven—a claim that ignores a number of the reasons we've become less competitive internationally.

Save More And Export More: Striking a better balance at home means saving more and spending less, reforming our financial system, and reducing our long-term budget deficit. With those changes, we will see a greater emphasis on exports that we can build, produce, and

sell all over the world, with the goal of doubling U.S. exports by 2014. This is ultimately an employment strategy, because higher exports will support millions of well-paying American jobs, including those that service innovative and profitable new technologies. As a part of that effort, we are reforming our export controls consistent with our national security imperatives.

And then it throws in a paragraph dedicated to deficit reduction which offers little to explain why that—rather than a range of other actions—is so central to our national security (though it does make it pretty clear this deficit reduction won't focus on military spending).

Reduce the Deficit: We cannot grow our economy in the long term unless we put the United States back on a sustainable fiscal path. To begin this effort, the Administration has proposed a 3-year freeze in nonsecurity discretionary spending, a new fee on the largest financial services companies to recoup taxpayer losses for the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), and the closing of tax loopholes and unnecessary subsidies. The Administration has created a bipartisan fiscal commission to suggest further steps for medium-term deficit reduction and will work for fiscally responsible health insurance reform that will bring down the rate of growth in health care costs, a key driver of the country's fiscal future.

The thing is, there are a number of economically-related issues that are more closely connected with our national security yet receive inadequate attention, in some cases because doing so would conflict with the ideology of the deficit hawks.

Manufacturing: For example, there is absolutely

no discussion of the role of manufacturing in national security. The NSS sees investing in science, technology, engineering, and math education as one means to keep American competitive technologically. It calls for federal investment in science research. But it neglects the way in which manufacturing turns this know-how into capacity that has always been central to US dominance. At a time when we risk losing key capacities to make our nifty war toys because of the decline in manufacturing, this silence is particularly troubling. But rebuilding our manufacturing capacity takes more than investment in basic science; it requires a concerted strategy to help the US compete with the mercantilist economies that increasingly dominate manufacturing.

Real Financial Reform: While the NSS—as the fourth blockquote above makes clear—pays lip service to reforming our financial system, it never explicitly acknowledges that this must mean more than restoring stability. It must also incent investment in productive capacity rather than bubbles. And the Administration has repeatedly stopped far short of such reforms. Indeed, the Administration has pointedly avoided doing the things that might return our economy to making things again, rather than encouraging finance as a key driver of economic growth.

Infrastructure: The NSS *does* address the role of our infrastructure in national security. It notes the necessity of protecting our infrastructure.

Security at home relies on our shared efforts to prevent and deter attacks by identifying and interdicting threats, denying hostile actors the ability to operate within our borders, protecting the nation's critical infrastructure and key resources, and securing cyberspace. That is why we are pursuing initiatives to protect and reduce vulnerabilities in critical infrastructure, at our borders, ports, and airports, and to enhance

overall air, maritime, transportation, and space and cyber security.

It notes the importance of our digital infrastructure to protecting our electrical grids.

Our daily lives and public safety depend on power and electric grids, but potential adversaries could use cyber vulnerabilities to disrupt them on a massive scale. The Internet and e-commerce are keys to our economic competitiveness, but cyber criminals have cost companies and consumers hundreds of millions of dollars and valuable intellectual property. The threats we face range from individual criminal hackers to organized criminal groups, from terrorist networks to advanced nation states. Defending against these threats to our security, prosperity, and personal privacy requires networks that are secure, trustworthy, and resilient. Our digital infrastructure, therefore, is a strategic national asset, and protecting it—while safeguarding privacy and civil liberties—is a national security priority.

The document's most sustained focus on infrastructure focuses on public-private partnerships.

Improve Resilience Through Increased Public-Private Partnerships: When incidents occur, we must show resilience by maintaining critical operations and functions, returning to our normal life, and learning from disasters so that their lessons can be translated into pragmatic changes when necessary. The private sector, which owns and operates most of the nation's critical infrastructure, plays a vital role in

preparing for and recovering from disasters. We must, therefore, strengthen public-private partnerships by developing incentives for government and the private sector to design structures and systems that can withstand disruptions and mitigate associated consequences, ensure redundant systems where necessary to maintain the ability to operate, decentralize critical operations to reduce our vulnerability to single points of disruption, develop and test continuity plans to ensure the ability to restore critical capabilities, and invest in improvements and maintenance of existing infrastructure. [my emphasis]

This was written, of course, before Obama admitted he was wrong to trust BP in its response to the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

Where I was wrong was in my belief that the oil companies had their act together when it came to worst-case scenarios.

But the discussion of investing in our publicly owned infrastructure is limited to one sentence.

Our recovery includes rebuilding an infrastructure that will be more secure and reliable in the face of terrorist threats and natural disasters.

We did invest in infrastructure as part of the recovery plan—but primarily that which was shovel-ready. As a result, we haven't even begun to address vulnerabilities in some aspects of our infrastructure (like water and sewer) that would make easy targets of attack. And ongoing infrastructure investment—which contributes both to resilience in case of attack and international competitiveness—is precisely the kind of no-nonsense national security action that falls by the wayside when you make deficit

reduction a more important goal than overall economic recovery.

Domestic terrorism: Largely in an effort to avoid describing Islamic extremism as the source of terrorism, this document uses neutral language that might also apply to domestic terrorists.

Empowering Communities to Counter Radicalization: Several recent incidences of violent extremists in the United States who are committed to fighting here and abroad have underscored the threat to the United States and our interests posed by individuals radicalized at home. Our best defenses against this threat are well informed and equipped families, local communities, and institutions. The Federal Government will invest in intelligence to understand this threat and expand community engagement and development programs to empower local communities. And the Federal Government, drawing on the expertise and resources from all relevant agencies, will clearly communicate our policies and intentions, listening to local concerns, tailoring policies to address regional concerns, and making clear that our diversity is part of our strength—not a source of division or insecurity.

But the NSS doesn't really consider the unique danger represented by domestic terrorists who would receive less national security scrutiny. And just as importantly, it doesn't consider some of the underlying causes—like increasing economic insecurity and inequality—that might contribute to such domestic terrorism. Doing so, of course, would require balancing the ideological preferences of deficit hawks against real economic development. But again, that's not going to happen once deficit reduction becomes a goal unto itself, as it is here.

In short, the Administration has rather bizarrely stuck deficit reduction into the national security strategy while ignoring several equally-probably more-important issues that the ascendancy of the deficit hawks has led this country to neglect. Which is just one more indication of how dangerous and counterproductive the deficit scolds are to this country.