A Threat to National Security

The United States faces one of the most perilous conditions that I can remember in my professional life. The greatest threat we face today is not external, but internal. Our inability as a nation to reach a durable consensus on plans that match our national goals with our financial resources is, in my judgment, the greatest National Security risk.

I distinguish here between National Security (capital N and S) and lower-case national security. The latter refers to military capabilities, the size of our army, the effectiveness of our weapons, the quality of military training, the deployment and pace of operations, and so forth. That is lower-case national security, to which I have devoted most of my professional career. Capital-letter National Security concerns the vitality of our economy, the ability to generate new ideas, the consensus in society to carry burdens for national purposes, and conviction in the legitimacy of our political foundation and its institutions.

The budget deficits we now face are a threat to both dimensions of national security. Most immediately, the United States faces the threat of sequester—a mindless process that represents the default of responsibility by U.S. politicians. If the sequester is triggered, it will impose damaging cuts on our defense establishment and programs. It also will impose crippling cuts on domestic spending, to include federal support for the nation’s science and engineering research and development system. Serious as these are, the fundamental threat to National Security lies elsewhere: in our inability to find common purpose on an obvious problem. Each political party is proposing to solve the fiscal imbalance only in a manner that satisfies its base constituencies. This will fail. The problem is so vast that it demands a broad-based consensus, and that can come only with compromise.

We have a chart to navigate these waters. President Obama asked Congress to create a national commission—chaired by former Senator Alan Simpson and former White House Chief of Staff Erskine Bowles—to find a solution to this problem. This bipartisan effort produced in 2010 a plan that would set the United States on a healthy path over the next 10 years. At its core is a fundamental compromise: The plan calls for cutting $3 of spending for every $1 of new taxes. The cuts will primarily be required in entitlements, especially Social Security and Medicare. The American public will support a plan that affects their lives if it is efficacious and fair. Americans know that we have a serious problem, but they have yet to hear either party present plans that meet the fairness test. Simpson-Bowles gives the nation such a plan. But the United States lacks politicians with the maturity and sense of responsibility to enact it.

Sadly, Republican and Democratic leaders have landed on identical strategies to win the next election: anger their respective bases so fundamentally that they come out to vote against the other candidate. This may be clever politics, but it is deeply flawed national leadership. Both political parties, through their behavior, are threatening National Security. It goes far beyond the immediate sequester issue. Our fiscal imbalance threatens federal support for the research and development needed to seed future innovation, sovereign creditworthiness, support for education, the refreshment of talent in government service, and much more. This is a gigantic threat to National Security.

Ultimately, the burden rests with the citizens of the United States, because they must solve this problem. Our politicians will continue to disappoint us until we demand that they meet a higher standard. It is the voters who elect national leaders who are responsible for this sad state. Every American needs to demand that the two political parties find a genuine compromise. Our National Security demands it.

— John J. Hamre
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