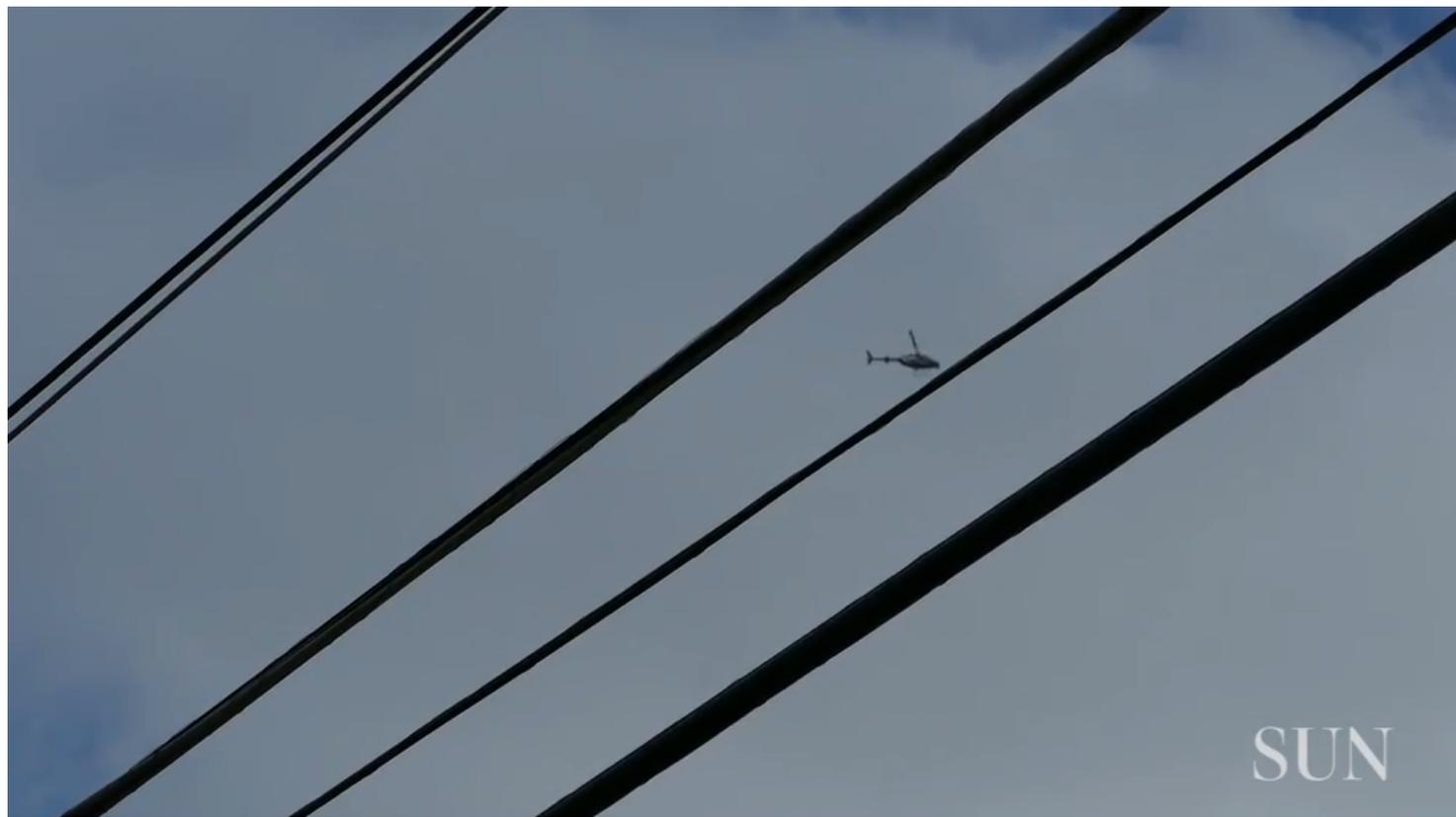


# U.S. debt addiction threatens national security



The Trump administration proposed a spending plan that projects deficits as far as the eye can see. Add in the tax cut Republicans pushed and the extra spending Congress approved, and the result is a flood of red ink projected to send the national debt ever higher. (Feb. 12, 2018)

By **Norton A. Schwartz, Todd J. Stein**

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**A** rising China. An emboldened Russia. A nuclear Iran. Cyberwarfare. Ask a defense expert to name America's biggest security concerns, and one of these will likely top the list.

These threats are real, of course. But one of the biggest dangers to our nation isn't a hostile foreign actor. It's a domestic one — our leaders' addiction to debt.

The U.S. national debt is rising unsustainably. The Pentagon recently has been asking for more money, and Congress has been inclined to give it to them. Absent dramatic reform, national security will soon take a back seat to mandatory debt service.

Congress needs to adjust course and put the nation back on a path toward fiscal responsibility without sacrificing our ability to defend ourselves. Our leaders can start by setting specific, long-term security goals — and then giving the Pentagon the financial certainty it needs to meet them.

The federal government currently spends more than \$300 billion each year servicing the nation's \$21 trillion debt. Those payments get heftier each time the Federal Reserve hikes interest rates, as it did two times earlier this year. Rates are expected to continue to rise in the years ahead.

In the next decade, interest payments are on track to account for a bigger percentage of the federal budget than either Medicaid or defense.

Complicating matters even further? Debt payments are mandatory, just like outlays for Social Security and Medicare. So when interest rates rise, Congress will have no choice but to scale back spending elsewhere to meet our debt-payment obligations.

When those defense cuts will be enacted — and how deep they will be — is almost impossible to predict. This uncertainty, however, undermines our security.

Defense planners, after all, require a solid sense of the resources they'll have to draw from in the years ahead. If ballooning debt payments force Congress to radically trim security spending with little warning, formulating and executing even a medium-term strategy will be difficult, if not impossible.

Our leaders can mitigate this uncertainty by incorporating the threat posed by ballooning debt into the next National Security Strategy — and outlining the administration's plans for dealing with it. Such a document would give decision makers the details they need to smartly and predictably allocate taxpayer resources.

More importantly, Congress needs to revise its budget process. At present, lawmakers write and mark up numerous funding bills each year to keep the government open. But budgeting every single year hampers long-term planning — and creates uncertainty for every federal agency.

One possible fix? Biennial budgeting. A two-year process would give every program — including those at the Pentagon — more certainty. This would help policymakers plan and encourage the executive branch to spend federal dollars more strategically.

The Pentagon also needs to start modernizing — and fast. This doesn't just mean developing next generation combat systems. It means having the courage to shutter unnecessary or outdated systems, programs and facilities.

Finally, Pentagon officials must put the funds they're allocated to the best possible use. Congress is expected to tighten the purse strings in the years to come, so officials will need to find savings wherever they can — and reinvest those resources in programs necessary to address future challenges and threats.

Debt is our nation's biggest danger. The White House and Congress need to take this threat seriously by setting clear national security priorities and giving defense planners the certainty they need to keep America safe.

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