

# Nicholson says defense spending should be spared in efforts to cut federal debt

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GOP U.S. Senate candidate Kevin Nicholson says defense spending should not be slashed in efforts to rein in the federal debt, but he says the Afghanistan war strategy has been flawed.

“If we are not able to project the force that can credibly keep bad guys at bay, we are going to pay for it in the long run in both blood and treasure,” the ex-combat Marine told a WisPolitics.com luncheon in Madison. “You should always think about military spending as an insurance payment.”

But in making the comments, he made clear that the root of military spending is more directly related to pensions and other benefits rather than equipment.

“It’s not aircraft carriers; it’s people,” he said, adding he as a veteran can also hold the military accountable when it comes to spending.

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Nicholson’s comments nearly mirrored those made later in the day by President Trump in his State of the Union speech, in which he called on Congress to remove caps on defense spending to in part provide for building up the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

“In confronting these horrible dangers, we know that weakness is the surest path to conflict, and unmatched power is the surest means of our true and great defense,” Trump said.

Nicholson’s experience as a combat veteran also informed his view of the ongoing

war in Afghanistan, a conflict for which the United States, in his view, must set realistic expectations as to not remain there indefinitely.

“I think that it’s realistic to set a bar which says that Afghanistan should ... have a military and police force that are capable of defeating internal security threats,” said Nicholson, who served in Afghanistan. “What we did is infuse too many American-oriented political principles into their government. Ultimately we don’t try to make Afghanistan the United States, because it’s not going to be such.”

He said he’s largely satisfied with the Trump administration’s handling of the conflict in Afghanistan, but circled back to the importance of having a realistic plan there.

“I think the president’s focus on keeping decisions made based on what’s happening on the ground is the right one. I’d still like to see an overall strategic shift in Afghanistan, and I think we’re making that now, that puts in a realistic expectation for what can be accomplished,” he said.”

Nicholson also said the recently passed Republican tax rewrite is a “step in the right direction” toward building an environment that will encourage economic growth. But he said it’s not perfect.

Economic growth, he said, is the key to balancing out nation’s ballooning federal debt, which he predicted will “destabilize our economy [and] our currency” and “will make it harder for us to keep ourselves safe.”

He blamed the country’s entitlement programs for the debt, but said a balanced federal budget will arise from growth driven by “low, broad and consistently applied tax rates.”

Nicholson brushed off a CBO report that projected the tax bill would increase the federal debt by about \$1.5 trillion, telling the audience to “take any scoring done by the CBO and throw it in the trash bucket.”

Nicholson was unclear as to whether he supports a full repeal of the Affordable Care Act, although he denounced the program and said the nation must rein in health care spending through efforts at greater price transparency and consumer choice.

“If you take every real problem with healthcare, [Obamacare] exacerbates it,” he said.

He compared the single-payer healthcare plan, Medicare for All, championed by some on the left including U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin to the VA's current system, which he called out as lacking innovation and cost control. The point also gave him a chance to knock the Madison Dem, accusing her of turning a blind eye to a report her office was given that doctors at the Tomah VA facility were overprescribing opiates.

But he avoided criticism of Gov. Scott Walker for his reinsurance plan to contain Obamacare premium increases.

"I think Governor Walker is doing the best he can with a system that Barack Obama and Tammy Baldwin broke," he said.