



Pentagon spending cuts: Dangerous or just overdue?

By PAULINE JELINEK

WASHINGTON (AP) — What are taxpayers supposed to think? The Pentagon says threatened budget cuts will invite aggression, endanger national security and devastate its operations.

Though that view has plenty of adherents, there also are plenty of naysayers who call the Defense Department's predictions a scare tactic by bureaucrats desperate to protect their turf.

"This is palpable nonsense ... the idea that somehow or another this is going to be Armageddon," said Lawrence Korb, a former assistant defense secretary who is a senior fellow at the left-leaning Center for American Progress.

At issue is the Pentagon's effort to prevent \$500 billion in automatic, across-the-board defense budget cuts over 10 years if a bipartisan congressional supercommittee can't agree by Nov. 23 on \$1.2 trillion or more in deficit reductions over a decade.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has warned Congress that a half-trillion-dollar cut, on top of \$450 billion in savings already planned by the military, "would be devastating for the department."

Korb disagrees.

"They're acting like good bureaucrats ... trying to protect their rice bowls," he said.

Added Christopher Preble of the libertarian Cato Institute, "The taxpayer should understand how much we spend on the military" and how much that spending has grown.

In the 10 years since the Sept. 11 terror attacks, annual budgets for the military have nearly doubled to close to \$700 billion. The U.S. accounts for nearly half of the defense money spent around the world — more than the next 17 nations combined. The U.S. naval fleet is as big as the next 13 navies combined, according to various analyses and some of the Pentagon's own accounting in recent years.

Though many believe the automatic cuts will never come to pass, here are some points and counterpoints in the debate over looming spending cuts:

— Panetta told senators in a letter this week that after a decade of the threatened cuts, the U.S. would have the smallest ground force since 1940, the smallest number of ships since 1915 and the smallest Air Force ever.

But it's not about the numbers, according to Todd Harrison of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. Greater firepower and tonnage make today's naval fleet smaller but more powerful, he said.

Likewise, Korb suggests the U.S. could safely reduce the number of Navy aircraft carriers and Air Force fighters by 25 percent because the military can rely on unmanned planes and precision-guided munitions.

Defense officials have said the Army and Marines could be decreased by some 65,000 troops or more. Korb suggests cutting 100,000 troops to return to pre-Sept. 11 levels and slashing the nation's arsenal of nuclear weapons from 5,000 to 311.

— Panetta has used apocalyptic terms such as "doomsday," "hollow force" and "paper tiger" to describe damage the cuts would do and says the military would have to rethink its strategy on what missions it could handle in the future.

Harrison argues that's the way it should be.

"In an era of constrained resources you should adapt your strategy to fit within resource constraints," he said. "This is a good moment for rethinking the way we're engaging in the world," including ways allies can share more of the burden.

Preble agreed.

"Panetta says that we would have to recalibrate our national security strategy if the military's budget is cut," Preble said. "I certainly hope that is the case — such a recalibration is long overdue."

— The Pentagon says the \$500 billion in reductions would be in addition to \$450 billion in savings already planned. Panetta told senators this week that would mean up to a 23 percent reduction in the first year alone in 2013.

But some analysts put the reduction variously at 14 percent, 17 percent or 18 percent over time. And some say drawdowns after World War II, Korea, Vietnam and the Cold War were deeper and faster or at least comparable.

The bottom line, Preble said, is that defense spending under an automatic-cut scenario would return the budget to about where it was in 2007 — "hardly a lean year for the Pentagon."