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UPDATE 1-Pawlenty says cut Social Security, not US defense

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* Supports means testing to determine old-age benefits

* Does not support defense budget cuts (Adds Medicare, defense comments)

By [Kim Dixon](#)

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Reuters) - Republican presidential candidate Tim Pawlenty urged big changes to the Social Security retirement program on Wednesday, but said paring U.S. defense spending is not vital to tame the bloated federal budget.

The former Minnesota governor also said his plan to overhaul the Medicare health insurance program for the elderly and disabled will be different than a controversial plan passed by the Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives.

After announcing on Sunday he is running for the Republican presidential nomination to take on President Barack Obama in the 2012 election, Pawlenty is trailing in national polls which put him in about fifth or sixth place among Republican challengers.

He has moved to the right in recent weeks, despite backing some moderate Republican positions in the past and has vowed to send tough messages to voters. Those include reining in corporate subsidies and popular programs like Medicare to help trim a projected \$1.4 trillion U.S. budget deficit.

"Clearly within the Republican ranks at this point, all of the candidates are feeling like they have to cozy up to the Tea Party people," said Chris Arterton, a George Washington University political management professor. "He is trying to position himself as outside of Washington."

Pawlenty has also avoided calls for cuts in defense spending. "I'm not one who is going to stand before you and tell you that we should cut the defense budget," he said at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

But he said slowing the rate of growth in defense expenditure is possible, noting the pending drawdown of U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Asked about a revamping of the Medicare health insurance plan for the elderly pitched by Republican Representative Paul Ryan, Pawlenty said his plan would be different.

"We'll be offering a variety of choices where people can choose to stay in the current program," he said in contrast with Ryan's proposal to give seniors vouchers to buy their own private health insurance.

Another Republican presidential hopeful, Newt Gingrich, found himself in hot water with the party after he criticized Ryan's plan, which some say is costing Republicans politically.

RAISE RETIREMENT AGE

On Social Security, Pawlenty said: "We're going to have to look people in the eye and say, 'Do you know what? It is time. If you are new to the workforce, for you, we're going to gradually raise the retirement age over time, we have to.'"

He railed against government workers and what he described as their lavish compensation, even though such spending comprises a small slice of total federal spending.

This week he was praised by many conservatives when he supporting scrapping subsidies for corn-based ethanol fuel.

He has positioned himself as a deficit hawk but Democrats and other critics in his home state say he only papered over the cracks in Minnesota's budget, which is back in financial trouble.

Former Minnesota Governor Arne Carlson, also a Republican, this week accused Pawlenty of presiding over the biggest tax increase in the state's history -- because of increased local property taxes. (Additional reporting by Todd Melby in Minneapolis; editing by [Christopher Wilson](#))

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