

# Pawlenty: We can't reduce defense spending

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WASHINGTON — In a Tim Pawlenty federal administration, every agency and department head would be subject to the budget scalpel — except the Pentagon.

Addressing a small audience brought together Wednesday by the Cato Institute, a libertarian Washington think tank, Pawlenty said everything would be on the table under his plan to end deficit spending and reduce the nation's more than \$14 trillion debt. He said he would tinker with Medicare and Social Security to save money and freeze pay and benefits for federal employees.

## Contradiction

But in response to a question about the cost of deploying U.S. troops around the world, Pawlenty said defense spending would be untouchable if he becomes president.

"I'm not one who's going to stand before you and say we should cut the defense budget," the former Minnesota governor said. He added that reducing American troop presence in strategic regions would weaken America's global position.

"We can slow it down, make it more efficient, but I'm not for shrinking America's presence in the world."

Speaking to reporters later, Pawlenty said "there are no sacred cows, and we are going to have to make everybody make a contribution" toward debt relief.

When asked about the apparent contradiction on defense, Pawlenty said: "We need to make sure we maintain it as a priority. The rate of growth can be slowed down, but it should not shrink in absolute terms."

Pawlenty's defense of military spending drew a rebuke from the organization that hosted him and has given him good marks for his fiscal stewardship as governor of Minnesota.

"There is a difference between military spending and defense spending," said Ed Crane, Cato's president. "The Constitution provides for a military to defend the U.S. — not to democratize the world. One would hope that presidential candidates would consider America's commitments overseas very seriously before endorsing those commitments."

Pawlenty was in the nation's capital two days after officially declaring his candidacy for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination to talk about the need to get federal spending under control. Pawlenty billed the event as part of his "truth tour," in which he lays out what he considers frank and honest positions on how to resolve the nation's fiscal crisis.

While announcing his candidacy in Iowa on Monday, Pawlenty talked about eliminating subsidies for ethanol production. On Tuesday, he was in Florida discussing reforming Medicare and Social Security. He is scheduled to speak Friday at a forum in Washington sponsored by the Faith and Freedom Coalition, a conservative group founded by Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition.

In addressing America's fiscal woes, Pawlenty said, "The bottom line is there can be no more ducking and bobbing and weaving about the real problem." Part of that problem, according to Pawlenty, is federal employee compensation.

"In many cases, public employees are overpaid and overbenefited," Pawlenty said. "We can't have people who are paid by the taxpayers getting better benefits than the taxpayers themselves."

Pawlenty said one of his first steps as president would be to freeze the pay and benefits of federal workers until they come in line with private-sector pay and benefits.

'Political theater'

William Dougan, president of the National Federation of Federal Employees, called Pawlenty's public-employee plan "nothing but political theater."

"It is positively shameful that Governor Pawlenty is looking to score political points at the expense of VA doctors and nurses, border patrol agents and defense civilians who support the mission of our brave men and women overseas," Dougan said. "When selfish politics trump sound policy, it is the American people who pay the price."

Pawlenty cited several steps he took as Minnesota governor as examples of the kind of bold leadership it will take to tackle the debt — leadership he said President Barack Obama has not shown. Pawlenty said he negotiated benefit concessions to resolve a 44-day transit union strike in 2004.

"We did pension reform before it was cool and popular," Pawlenty said in a reference to efforts in several states to reduce benefits for public employees.

But as Pawlenty tries to define himself as a bold, honest politician, the South St. Paul native faces deeper scrutiny of his record as governor and his statements as a presidential candidate.

Club for Growth, a fiscal conservative group that has spent millions on political campaign advertising, released a “white paper” Tuesday that praised Pawlenty’s efforts to control spending and applauded his support for school choice and tort reform. But the group also portrays Pawlenty as a flip-flopper on tax increases, public subsidies for a professional baseball stadium, government bailouts and a cap-and-trade energy plan.

“It’s clear that Governor Pawlenty is, for the most part, hard to pin down on his exact ideological moorings,” Club for Growth concluded. “A President Pawlenty, we suspect, would fight for pro-growth policies, but would be susceptible to adopting ‘pragmatic’ policies that grow government.”

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