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The Politics of Defense Cuts

The president tries—and fails—to paint Republicans into a corner.

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Not that long ago it looked like President Obama had Republicans right where he wanted them. As the debate over the 2011 budget played out on Capitol Hill, he threatened to veto the legislation if it cut one dollar more from defense spending than the budget request submitted by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.

It was an unusual position for Republicans to find themselves in. They'd been fighting against defense cuts since liberals dropped all that imperialist talk of paying any price and bearing any burden in favor of calling for an Air Force funded by bake sales. And suddenly a Democratic president—*this Democratic president*—was threatening to veto Republican legislation that would, the White House claimed, “leave the department without the resources and flexibility needed to meet vital military requirements.”

Obama and Gates have cut viciously at the defense budget since the administration first came into office. Nothing's been safe. They cut aircraft programs like the F-22 and the C-17, they cut the Navy down to its smallest size since World War I, and now they were cutting the Army and Marine Corps by 47,000 troops even as those two services bear the brunt of the fighting in Afghanistan. But they were playing the politics well. Obama was bankrupting the country and devaluing the dollar. Who, then, was going to argue with his Republican defense secretary when he said he didn't need all those pricey weapons?

The Obama-Gates cuts had begun very deliberately, with big speeches made to defend the termination of high-profile, big-ticket, but mostly controversial weapons systems. But after the rout of Democrats at the polls last fall, and with Republicans promising they were serious about cutting spending this time, Obama and Gates grew bolder. Even as they cut deeper and deeper, they cleverly tried to paint the new Tea Partyish Republican Congress as extreme, and as endangering U.S. troops with plans to reduce the deficit by cutting defense.

Except it didn't work. It turns out the Republican Congress didn't have any intention of making additional defense cuts. A shutdown was averted, a stop-gap funding measure was passed, and Republicans focused their attention on Paul Ryan's 2012 budget. House Armed Services Committee chairman Buck McKeon, along with Republican members of his committee, pushed Ryan to keep defense spending roughly where the Defense Department had requested. In a budget proposal that would cut \$4 trillion over 10 years, Ryan managed to keep defense spending on a course for small but steady growth—roughly in line with Defense Department planning.

For all the recent talk about how the Ryan budget has made Republicans vulnerable to Democratic attacks on Medicare, little attention has been paid to how it has once again made Democrats vulnerable to Republican attacks on defense. Just when it looked like Obama had neutralized an issue Republicans had owned for decades, he threw it all away. In an attempt to show he was as serious as Ryan about reining in spending, he gave a speech calling for another \$400 billion in defense cuts over ten years—an arbitrary number that Obama didn't even try to connect to an assessment of the challenges U.S. forces will face in the next decade.

Liberals still seem hopeful that the Tea Party will lead Republicans into a defense spending revolt, but they're hoping against all evidence to the contrary. The early frontrunners for the Republican nomination have all made the case that the country can't afford the further military cuts Obama has called for.

Tim Pawlenty broke the news to the libertarians at the Cato Institute last week. When asked why the United States needed so many military bases, Pawlenty pushed back. “I'm not one who's going to stand before you and say we need to cut the defense budget,” he said. “I'm not for shrinking America's presence in the world. I'm for making sure America remains the world leader.” Alex Conant, a senior Pawlenty aide, says that “a president's budget reflects his priorities and Obama's overseen a huge increase in spending on stimulus and Obama-care.” Pawlenty, on the other hand, would “refocus spending on the federal government's core responsibilities, like national defense.”

Likewise, when Mitt Romney gave a speech about fiscal responsibility in New Hampshire in March, he stipulated that because defense comprises just “20 percent [of federal spending], and given what’s happening in the world, we should not reduce our commitment to national security. In particular, we should not cut the number of our men and women in uniform!”

The potential candidates most closely associated with the Tea Party tend to share that view. Sarah Palin has been vocal in her opposition to additional defense cuts, and Michele Bachmann, in her own list of proposed cuts, went no further on military spending than Ryan and Gates. It’s the dropouts—Mitch Daniels, Haley Barbour, and Mike Huckabee—who were most squishy on the issue of defense spending. And as is often the case with squishes, they were squishy about being squishy. The only Republican candidate who seems gung-ho for serious defense cuts is Obama administration veteran Jon Huntsman.

In fact, the politics of national security seem to be returning to more familiar, and more favorable, terrain for Republicans as the 2012 presidential campaign gets under way. Obama’s uncharacteristically impulsive response to the Ryan budget, with its call for \$400 billion in new defense cuts, will now be followed by the departure of Secretary Gates, who provided cover and credibility for Obama’s stingy defense budgets with Congress, the military, and the press.

Ironically, on his way out the door, Gates is doing to Obama what Obama tried to do to Republicans just a few weeks ago. In a series of speeches and press conferences, Gates has warned that there isn’t any fat left to cut—and that the president risks jeopardizing our ability to meet vital military requirements. At the American Enterprise Institute last week, Gates said, “We need to be honest with the president, with the Congress, with the American people, indeed with ourselves, about what those consequences [of more cuts] are: that a smaller military, no matter how superb, will be able to go fewer places and be able to do fewer things.”

The Republican candidates for president need to be honest with the American people, too. The military has done everything Obama has asked of it, including killing Osama bin Laden in a daring raid that relied on capabilities that were previously undisclosed or only rumored, like stealth-modified helicopters and stealth drones. American aircraft are flying missions over Libya, American soldiers and Marines are fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, and American ships are supporting combat and relief missions all over the world. Republicans are well positioned to seize the opportunity and make a compelling case that Obama’s defense proposals are irresponsible and dangerous. It’s not just good politics, it’s good policy.

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