

Obama's furlough apocalypse fails to materialize

By: Brendan Bordelon – August 14, 2013

Despite Obama administration warnings that the sequester would force thousands of government workers into mandatory unpaid leave for weeks on end, as the fiscal year winds down nearly all federal agencies have avoided the promised amount of employee furloughs.

Government Executive reports that since the sequester took effect on March 1, most federal departments have been able to reduce the number of furlough days initially planned. A few managed to avoid furloughs altogether.

“The Obama administration and cabinet secretaries did not think the sequester was going to happen, so they didn't plan for it,” said Chris Edwards, a scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute.

“Now that they've had a number of months to dig through their budget to find funds that aren't being used and shifting money from year to year, they're finding pockets of money they didn't know were there,” he told The Daily Caller News Foundation.

In late February, with the sequester imminent, President Obama and federal agencies threatened cataclysmic consequences for government employees.

“Border Patrol agents will see their hours reduced,” Obama said. “FBI agents will be furloughed . . . Air traffic controllers and airport security will see cutbacks, which means more delays in airports across the country . . . Thousands of teachers and educators will be laid off, and thousands of parents will have to scramble to find childcare for their kids.”

Janet Napolitano told a congressional committee that Homeland Security would need to furlough thousands of employees, including frontline law enforcement officials, for at least 14 days. Defense Undersecretary Ashton Carter promised furloughs for up to 22 weeks for its 800,000 employees.

But at the same time, agencies like the Government Accountability Office, the Small Business Administration and even the monstrous Department of Health and Human Services predicted they could ride out the sequester furlough-free.

The doomsday rhetoric vanished once the sequester actually took effect. Planned furloughs at Homeland Security were cancelled, as were those at DOJ. Treasury cut theirs from five days to three. Housing and Urban Development cancelled two of its planned furlough days, and the Environmental Protection Agency cut three.

The Pentagon, which had originally planned to furlough 750,000 civilian employees for a whopping 22 days, eventually trimmed that number down to 6.

Some union officials took credit for the furlough fold. “We showed the agencies that there were numerous alternatives to dealing with sequestration,” Jacqueline Simon, the public policy director at the American Federation of Government Employees, told Government Executive.

But she also noted that the Obama administration deliberately exaggerated how hard the sequester would hit federal employees.

“The administration wrongfully assumed Congress would act,” she said. “Congress didn’t act. They didn’t care.”

Edwards agrees, at least partially. “There was political pressure to create all these scary scenarios, and they certainly did that,” he said.

But he also noted that by forcing agencies to carefully scrutinize their budgets, the sequester was in fact quite successful.

“I think there’s a political story that the Obama administration was trying to scare everyone about how bad the sequester would be,” he said, “but I think it’s also that agencies can cut spending if they get serious about it.”

“Now that [the sequester] has become a reality, they found they can cut spending easier than they thought,” Edwards concluded.