



As budget ax looms, Pentagon officials are mad about metaphors

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WASHINGTON — The Pentagon’s brass talks about killing in the most antiseptic terms imaginable. “Kinetic operations” are launched. Targets are “serviced.” Enemies are “removed from the battlefield.”

But threaten the military’s budget, and the language becomes gory and apocalyptic. In the past six months, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and other Pentagon officials have compared the arcane budget-cutting process known as sequestration to:

- “A doomsday mechanism”
- A gunshot to the head
- “Fiscal castration”
- “A goofy meat ax”

Panetta is especially fond of the “meat ax” descriptor, which he deployed no fewer than six times in congressional budget testimony last week.

The defense secretary’s rhetorical flourishes have, in turn, inspired an array of less-adept imitators throughout the Pentagon and Congress.

“It’s peanut butter,” Adm. Mike Mullen, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stammered in September. (Mullen meant that sequestration would force the Pentagon to spread the cuts evenly across the entire Department of Defense, hence the peanut butter analogy).

Then, last month, Adm. James Winnefeld, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs, unleashed the most confounding mixed metaphor of the sequestration season. “It basically takes a

chain saw to a budget, and out of the ashes of that budget, we're going to have to write a new strategy," he said. "That's not the way we want to do business."

(Is that the way we want to talk?)

Curiously, Gen. Martin Dempsey, who has a master's degree in English from Duke University, has avoided florid metaphors. The Joint Chiefs chairman simply says that the cuts would pose an "unacceptable risk" to the country's security.

The looming possibility of \$1 trillion in automatic defense cuts emerged from the bitter partisan stalemate last summer over the federal debt limit. In August, lawmakers reached a compromise that allowed the president to raise the debt limit but forced the Pentagon to reduce its budget by about \$487 billion in the next decade, a decrease of roughly 8 percent.

Under sequestration, that figure could double if President Barack Obama and Congress fail by the end of this year to cut an additional \$1.2 trillion in government spending over the next decade. Spending on non-defense programs favored by Democrats would be slashed, as well.

Both parties in Congress hate the cuts. The White House doesn't like them, either. But Obama, who hopes the potentially painful cuts will compel bipartisan compromise, does not want to bash them too forcefully. Meanwhile, the Pentagon, which stands to lose \$1 trillion, has incentive to complain as loudly as possible about them for the next 10 months.

Panetta, a far more effusive brand of Washington insider than Robert Gates, his buttoned-down predecessor, has wholeheartedly embraced his role as Pentagon's doomsday poet.

In September, Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., asked Panetta whether sequestration would be like "shooting ourselves in the foot?"

"You'd be shooting yourselves in the head!" Panetta countered.

"That's why I like you," Graham gushed.

Neither the secretary nor the lawmaker raised the possibility that the Pentagon might actually be able to spare the ammo in this new age of austerity. In November, Panetta warned that the automatic cuts would result in "a brigade without bullets."

Of late, other senior Pentagon officials have out-groesomed their boss. "I think about sequestration as fiscal castration," Brett Lambert, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for manufacturing policy, said at a defense industry conference. "It truly will emasculate the industrial base."

Panetta's preferred metaphor is the "meat ax." Variations include "goofy meat ax" and "blind meat ax."

“He worked in his family’s restaurant as a boy, so he knows precisely when a meat ax should and shouldn’t be used,” Pentagon spokesman George Little said.

To be sure, some defense analysts have suggested that the cuts would not eviscerate the military. The United States currently spends more on its armed forces than the next 10 nations, many of them allies, combined.

“We would still have the world’s only global force at a time when we are facing no real existential threats,” said Gordon Adams, who was the senior White House budget official for national security in the Clinton administration. “Hyperbole is great when you are playing politics, but it is not a real measure of the impact of these cuts on our capability.”

If the sequestration cuts were imposed, defense spending in the Pentagon’s base budget would fall to 2007 levels, adjusted for inflation. “That was not a lean year for the Pentagon by any stretch,” said Chris Preble, a vice president at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

The problem with sequestration is that the cuts would have to be made very quickly -- about \$50 billion would have to be excised from the 2013 budget. The law also mandates across-the-board cuts, meaning training budgets for special operations forces and military bands would have to be cut by the same amount.

The Pentagon could prepare a budget amendment that focuses the cuts on lower-priority items. But it refuses to do so.

Some analysts have speculated that his reluctance stems from a worry that a contingency plan might increase the likelihood of big cuts.

Last week, the Pentagon’s top budget official said the opposite was true. “I think the more we say [about it], the less people would like it,” said Robert Hale, the comptroller, in a Pentagon news conference.

Hale lifted his right hand and pledged that no one in the Pentagon was planning for the possibility of bigger cuts. He then launched another salvo in the department’s metaphorical war. He twice referred to sequestration as a “meat ax.”