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Budget Cage Match Unfolding On and Off Capitol Hill



Posted by Charles Ellison in [District](#) 1 day ago

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The mood on Capitol Hill quickly turned into a sour-tasting-lemon-head cage match as Democrats and Republicans exchanged public artillery over President Barack Obama's \$3.7 trillion budget for Fiscal Year 2012.

The anticipation had been high for a number of months, observers bracing for the inevitable impact of trigger itchy House Republicans enjoying newfound majority status.

Despite the staged coziness of White House lunches as corny attempts at bi-partisanship, House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH), upped his ante with \$100 billion in budget cuts. At last check, Members were voting into the wee hours of balmy, full-moon D.C. nights to either cut or save some \$60 billion in federal government spending.

"\$60 to \$100 billion is not serious," countered Tad DeHaven, budget analyst for the Cato Institute and Co-Editor of Cato's [Downsizinggovernment.org](#). DeHaven is convinced the cuts aren't deep enough, while also submitting to a communication gap between lawmakers singularly focused on re-election and citizens anxious about what's down the line. "The eight hundred pound gorillas in the room are entitlements, Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare and I would also offer up defense. They have to take on defense spending."

"What we've done is react circumspectively rather than melodramatically," said CBC Chairman Rep. Emmanuel Cleaver (D-MI) in describing some of the recalibration that took place last week as Congress struggled to respond to what some analysts were describing as a rudderless budget with little guidance from the Administration — shades of the same approach the President took in 2009 in passing health

care reform.

Meeting surprisingly stiff resistance from some Republican colleagues to a conservative proposal to cut \$22 billion in spending, Rep. Joe Walker (R-IL) urged his people to get “bold” in the face of cantankerous senior Members seeking to keep beloved programs on tap. “The American people are ahead of us. They are asking us to go one step forward,” claimed Rep. Joe Walsh (R-IL).

But, Rep. Norm Dicks (D-WA), ranking Dem on the House Appropriations Committee wasn’t having it. “This is a meat-axe approach on top of a meat-axe approach. It is a double meat-axe approach!”

Dicks’ outburst in Committee is being repeated nationwide as stimulus dollars run out and budget crises are already being felt across state capitols and city halls. Drama unfolded this week in a spot far removed geographically from the Beltway in Madison, Wisconsin, capitol of the Badger State, in which 25,000 state employees converged within hitting distance of nervous Republican state legislators and a newly-elected GOP Governor looking to cut \$300 million from the state budget in bold defiance of the powerful, Democratic-leaning public sector unions.

Tensions flared four days in a row as of this story’s filing, with Governor Walker’s office unwilling or unavailable to comment. Walker, clearly surprised by the Tahrir Square-like protests, was even putting his National Guard on notice as news reports and flying epithets suggested a breakout of violence.

A high-placed political appointee in Madison intimately familiar with the Governor’s office and the situation there was willing to talk off record. They described the situation as “volatile.”

“They’re not playing around,” said the source in describing Walker and state Republicans. “I have to give him credit: He’s doing everything he said he was going to do on the campaign trail.”

“Democrats, and unions, were acting like kids during the last election cycle, now they’re getting all active,” the source added. “Look where short-term thinking got them.”

Cleaver, a former two-term Mayor of Kansas City, expresses concern over the possibility of cuts on the state and local level. “These are not simply people feeding off the public dole,” argues Cleaver. “These are police men and teachers who have become jobless through no fault of their own. We do not feel that the budget should be balanced on their backs. It’s not right. There is no such thing as a Republican storm water sewer or a Democratic pothole.”

“We need tough cuts in order to balance our budget and reduce the federal deficit, but this is the absolute wrong approach,” Rep. Alyson Schwartz (D-PA) shot back at Republicans after a chamber battle to preserve a \$300 million federal police recruitment and hiring program. “It is deplorable that some in Congress are willing to take police officers off our streets simply to meet a political goal.”

It’s the second recession quietly described by leading economists, but few folks inside Washington want to worry about at the moment. Still, what happens on Capitol Hill is bound to severely impact decisions made in state legislative sessions and city hall offices. With money running low, states and cities are already bracing for cuts to key services and programs, with forks and knives looking at pensions, too. That’s an impact on some 20 million Americans all representing the public sector workforce.

In a revealing conversation on NBC’s *Meet the Press* recently, Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed (D) seemed eager to get on with it. “What we’re trying to do in Atlanta is just to go on with our work,” said Reed. “I do believe we need to make hard decisions much faster.”

Reed later added that “the President had an honest conversation with us more than six weeks ago and we were already winding down. Tell us the truth and we’ll get on with it.”

Other big city mayors appear a bit more reluctant to talk on record about the budget wars taking shape on Capitol Hill until they have a chance to further analyze the President’s budget. A spokesperson for Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter (D) admitted that Broad and Market Street still needed more time to examine the Administration numbers. Reed and his communications shop, perhaps worn from the play of his *Meet the Press* debut, were also unavailable for comment.

An anonymous source familiar with the local strategy claims mayors are ready to unleash on Republicans, particularly over Community Development Block Grants. But there is noticeable reticence on criticizing President Obama’s budget with the calculation mostly political. “They don’t want to vilify the President and put him at risk,” says the source. “But, they do want to put more pressure on Congress. So, they’re all for the 7.5 percent cut the White House proposed since it’s way more reasonable than what Republicans proposed. Cutting those grants that deep could really kill the cities.”

This article first appeared by author in [The Philadelphia Tribune](#).



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