



## **GOP defense hawks barely squawked on Mulvaney nomination**

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President Trump's choice for budget director, Rep. Mick Mulvaney, R-S.C., headlined a half a dozen nominees. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., filed to end debate on Monday night.

Depending on the Democrats' plans to resist the nominees, Mulvaney could receive his first full Senate vote on Wednesday and a final vote as early as Thursday.

What once looked like it could become an internal Republican battle between budget hawks and defense hawks never picked up much momentum after some harsh questioning from Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz.

No other Republican Mulvaney skeptics emerged.

Mulvaney's surprise nomination to run the Office of Management and Budget was cheered by fiscal conservatives who viewed the Freedom Caucus member as an uncompromising spending-cutter. The Cato Institute's Chris Edwards hailed him as "the most fiscally conservative budget director in decades."

But Mulvaney's fiscal conservatism caused him to vote for defense budget cuts other Republicans find unpalatable and to occasionally align himself with more libertarian-leaning GOP lawmakers on foreign policy.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., and Rep. Justin Amash, R-Mich, two leaders of this contingent, both endorsed Mulvaney for budget director.

None of this endeared Mulvaney to McCain, however. The longtime senator grilled Mulvaney at his confirmation hearings, alleging the South Carolinian spent his "entire congressional career pitting debt against the military and every time for you the military has been less important."

"I would remember if I voted to cut our defenses the way you did, congressman," McCain told him. "Maybe you don't take it with the seriousness that it deserves."

McCain also challenged Mulvaney on a vote to swiftly withdraw all troops from Afghanistan. "What were you thinking, honestly?" he asked.

When Mulvaney replied by citing the pain a constituent felt about his son's multiple deployments, an unimpressed McCain retorted, "So the answer is withdraw all troops from Afghanistan? That is crazy."

The dust-up with McCain wasn't the only snag Mulvaney's nomination hit. He disclosed that he had failed to pay taxes on a nanny he had employed, something that had scuttled past nominees.

But with the Senate split 52-48 in the Republicans' favor and a 60-vote threshold no longer required to invoke cloture, GOP defections are required to stop Trump nominees.

Once the majority seemed inclined to forgive Mulvaney after he overpaid the back payroll taxes to take the issue off the table, McCain persuading a handful of Republicans that a GOP budget director should favor more defense spending was the last remaining obstacle.

FreedomWorks, arguably the most libertarian on foreign policy of all the major Tea Party groups, mobilized against McCain and for Mulvaney.

"Sen. McCain's opposition to President Trump's pick is another action that shows he stands against responsible federal spending levels," FreedomWorks CEO Adam Brandon said in a statement. "He seems perfectly happy to continue spending money we don't have and continue raising the debt ceiling. He continues his career betraying conservatives."

Last year, McCain defeated a Republican primary challenger who campaigned in part on the idea that the high price tag of the 2008 GOP presidential nominee's foreign policy contradicted his claims to be a fiscal conservative.

"Foreign policy is actually John McCain's Achilles heel, not his greatest strength," said Kelli Ward, who lost to McCain by 12.5 percentage points.

Nevertheless, McCain voted to advance Mulvaney's nomination in committee and was seen as softening his opposition in general, causing some of the nominee's outside supporters to take an early victory lap.

"FreedomWorks activists have made more than 60,000 contacts with Sen. John McCain's office since his hostile questioning and 'Morning Joe' interview in which he said he was leaning toward a 'no' on Mulvaney," said the group's press secretary Jon Meadows. "We're glad he might be coming around to support President Trump's fiscally conservative nominee."

McCain's usual Senate allies never joined with him in criticizing Mulvaney. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., is with McCain on these policy issues but shares a home state with Mulvaney.

Graham and Sen. Tim Scott, R-S.C., have consistently supported Mulvaney's nomination. Mulvaney has been more sympathetic to Graham's immigration position than many conservative House Republicans.

Graham has also consistently avoided primary challenges from Republican members of the South Carolina House delegation, despite outside conservative groups' appetite for such a candidacy.

"We're coming to understand that we can't be either military hawks or deficit hawks," Sen. David Perdue, R-Ga., told McClatchy. "One of the greatest threats to American security that we face today is the national debt. We have to be hawkish on both matters if we want a secure future. For that, Mulvaney has the right experience and the right heart for OMB."

McCain, Graham and Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., were all critical of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during his confirmation hearings. The disagreements over Russia between congressional Republicans and the Trump administration provided them an opportunity to make a statement by blocking him.

All three senators wound up voting to confirm Tillerson. Barring a major change, Mulvaney is likely to join him in the Cabinet soon.

In addition to Mulvaney, McConnell filed cloture on Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt's nomination to head the Environmental Protection Agency, Wilbur Ross' nomination for commerce secretary, Rep. Ryan Zinke, R-Mont., for interior secretary, Ben Carson for secretary of housing and urban development, and former Texas Gov. Rick Perry for energy secretary.