



Republicans, Democrats agree they may miss Friday's sequester deadline

Susan Ferrechio February 23, 2013

Just days before automatic budget cuts are scheduled to rip \$85 billion in domestic and military spending from the federal budget, Congress and the White House are spending more time pointing fingers than negotiating the deficit-reduction deal that would avert the looming cuts.

Congress, returning Monday, has until Friday to strike a deal that to avoid the automatic cuts that economists said could cripple an already anemic economic recovery. But both Republicans and Democrats say it's increasingly likely they'll miss the Friday deadline, and they blame each other for the havoc those cuts, known as the sequester, would inflict.

"It's going to happen," Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said of the looming cuts.

President Obama called Republican and Democratic congressional leaders last week, but by the time they hung up, the GOP and president were no closer to an agreement. Republicans charged that while Obama has traveled widely stoking fears over the impact of the automatic cuts, he has brought little to the negotiating table that would help resolve the problem.

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"The president has suggested he has no plan," a spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky, told The Washington Examiner.

The Obama administration, meanwhile, charges that Republicans' refusal to accept higher taxes as a part of the deficit-reduction deal is preventing the two sides from striking a compromise. And should Congress fail to meet the Friday deadline for action, it will be because of congressional Republicans, the administration said.

Outgoing Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said that, thanks to Republicans, the automatic cuts would force his department to furlough air traffic controllers and other essential personnel, weakening air travel safety, causing long delays at airports and forcing airlines to cancel flights.

Congress and Obama agreed to the automatic budget cuts in August 2011, after a standoff over government borrowing. But the \$1.2 trillion in cuts over the next 10 years, half of it from the Pentagon, were never supposed to kick in. The two sides signed off on the agreement thinking the sequester would give them a needed incentive to work together. For the last year and a half, however, they have agreed on nothing.

Lawmakers already missed one deadline for a deal and had to delay the start of the sequester from Jan. 1 to March 1. And despite their own dire warnings of the damage the cuts will do, neither side is optimistic about meeting the Friday deadline.

Analysts and lawmakers said both sides see an advantage to missing the deadline.

Obama and congressional Democrats have been making the case to the public that Republicans are to blame for whatever consequences come from slashing the budget indiscriminately. Republicans, who claim Obama is exaggerating the impact of the cuts, say it may not be so bad if they kicked in.

Tanner said the automatic cuts would reduce federal spending by only about 1 percent over the next year, cutting domestic spending to 2009 levels and defense spending to 2007 levels. Agencies won't have to immediately furlough federal workers, as the administration suggests, because they'll have months to achieve the 8 percent savings the cuts would require, he said.

"If they do furlough employees," Tanner said, "that's a choice; that is not a requirement of the sequester."