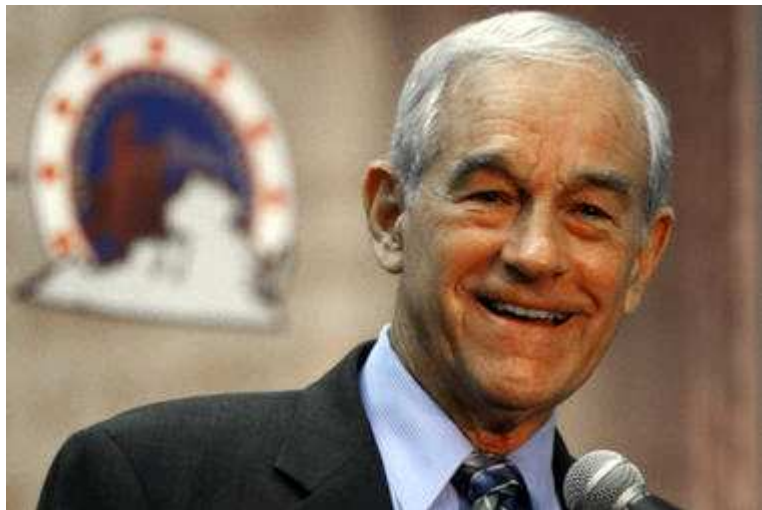


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Democrats' bold stand: Want to trim federal debt? Cut defense.

On Wednesday, 56 Democrats and one Republican said that any effort to reduce the federal debt needs to include defense cuts. They called for an independent commission to take up the issue.



Congressman Ron Paul addresses a news conference at the Virginia Tea Party Patriots Convention in Richmond, Va. (Richmond Times-Dispatch/Bob Brown/AP)

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Washington —

With a federal deficit of nearly \$1.3 trillion, \$13.6 trillion in federal debt, and a congressional budget process in shambles, 56 Democrats and Rep. Ron Paul (R) of Texas on Wednesday called on an independent commission to look for “substantial reductions” in one particular area – the national defense budget.

In another year, calls for defense cuts on the eve of a national election would play into a toxic electoral narrative for Democrats – that is, that they are soft on defense and national security.

But with many Republicans, too, facing a “tea party” rebellion on their right, the political calculus around even big defense cuts is shifting. Libertarian and tea-party groups are calling for a major downsizing of the federal government, and Democrats want to be sure that is not accomplished entirely on the back of social programs.

If current polling trends hold, a focus on defense cuts could get a boost after the Nov. 2 elections, as new House members come with a mandate to shrink the size of government.

“We are in a zero-sum situation,” said Rep. Barney Frank (D) of Massachusetts, who chairs the House Financial Services Committee, in a conference call with reporters Wednesday.

“It is now indisputable that if we do not substantially reduce planned worldwide defense expenditures, particularly on behalf of our allies who can and should be doing more to defend themselves, that we will not be able to meaningfully reduce our budget deficit without doing significant damage to our quality of life here at home,” he added.

In their “Pledge to America” as part of the midterm campaign, House Republicans previewed how they would approach budget cutting – by targeting nondefense, discretionary spending. But because the Defense Department accounts for nearly 56 percent of all discretionary spending, any viable budget-cutting proposal must go where the money is, say the 57 lawmakers.

"I am pleased to join Chairman Frank and so many of our colleagues who realize that the United States cannot sustain a military budget that costs nearly as much as the rest of the world's defense budgets combined," said Representative Paul – a libertarian and the lone Republican to sign on to the group's statement.

Without identifying specific cuts, the signers are calling on the 18-member National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform – due to report to the nation by Dec. 1 – to identify ways the US can cut missions overseas and reduce personnel and weapons systems without putting national security at risk.

"Cutting military spending requires limiting the ambitions it serves," said Benjamin Friedman, research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, in Wednesday's conference call. "We spend too much on defense because we choose too little, confusing our ambitions with the requirements of our safety."

Even when lawmakers are not gridlocked along partisan lines, cutting defense contracts and jobs has been so difficult for Congress that it has punted decisions on base closings, for example, to an independent commission. Rep. Ike Skelton (D) of Missouri, who chairs the House Armed Services Committee, released a letter Wednesday requiring the Pentagon to justify its decision to shut down the US Joint Forces Command, based in Norfolk, Va., which will affect thousands of local jobs. Rep. Glenn Nye (D) of Virginia is campaigning to protect those jobs, the elimination of which is seen as the first phase of a major Pentagon retrenchment in the new year.

On Sept. 2, the House Armed Services panel sent a letter to the deficit commission that cautioned against real cuts in defense spending, citing the impact on national security.

Fiscal watchdog groups say that the next round of defense cuts may also need the clout that an outside commission can provide.

"It is a major problem that Congress didn't even do a budget this year," says Robert Bixby, executive director of the Concord Coalition, a think tank based in Arlington, Va., and committed to controlling federal deficits. "The congressional budget process is clearly not functioning or performing the critical prioritization function that it needs to. If it takes a commission to look at that, it tells you that the regular order is out of order."

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