

Tea party to GOP: Don't spare Pentagon from budget ax

Tea party-backed GOP freshmen are eyeing the Pentagon – which remains the largest single spender of government dollars. Do they have the clout to target even cherished GOP priorities?

By [Anna Mulrine](#), Staff writer
posted January 25, 2011 at 7:28 pm EST

For tea party-backed House freshmen, riding into office on vows to slash government spending, the Pentagon's \$700 billion dollar budget looks like a ripe target.

But how much influence will they have on 2011 defense spending?

Some argue that [tea partiers](#) have already had substantive impacts, possibly influencing Secretary of Defense Robert Gates's decision to announce some considerable cuts of his own to the defense budget earlier this month. Many interpreted his announcement as a preemptive strike against calls for deeper reductions in Pentagon spending.

"The cuts announced earlier by Secretary Gates, at least to some degree, have to do with [the administration's] reading of how the salience of deficit reduction has risen since the election," says Tom Donnelly, director of the Center for Defense Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative Washington think tank.

The Defense Department cuts include [shrinking the size of the Army and Marine Corps after 2014](#), as well as reducing the use of contractors, on whom the Pentagon has become "far too dependent," says Gates.

Gates has submitted proposals to dramatically reduce and consolidate what he calls the "sprawling" network of intelligence organizations, to freeze the salaries of civilian Defense Department employees, and to eliminate some 100 general officer positions created after 9/11.

The Pentagon "cannot presume to exempt itself" from budget cuts in the face of America's "extreme fiscal duress," Gates said during a Jan. 6 press conference. "Not every defense dollar is sacred and well spent."

Tea partiers agree – as do a growing consensus of Republicans on Capitol Hill. Although Republicans exempted defense programs from their "Pledge to America" last year, new House majority leader Eric Cantor has said defense may well be on the chopping block after all.

This is the influence of the tea party, says Mr. Donnelly. "Republicans would have been more hesitant to put defense on the table had it not been for the tea party pushing them." It is also an effort by Mr. Cantor to be "more in tune and in sync and able to exert leadership across the Tea Party Caucus," he adds.

As for tea party-backed House freshman, "I think they're going to have to look at defense in the same way they look at everything," says Mark Meckler, co-founder and national coordinator for the Tea Party Patriots. "If we are going to have a nation to defend in the future, then [everything has to be on the table](#), from entitlements on the left to defense on the right – everything is going to have to be considered, and until everyone gets serious about that, we won't have a nation to defend."

But that sort of fervor often runs headlong into [political reality](#), says Benjamin Friedman, an analyst with the libertarian CATO Institute. "Right now in the Congress there are [101 freshman Republicans](#), and they were largely elected without having to go into much detail about defense, and in some cases without even taking a clear stance on the war," he says.

"Most said 'I'm for a strong defense,' and 'We need to take care of our troops' – that kind of general rhetoric.

Now they're going to be forced in the next few months to come up with positions, and once they do they'll be stuck with them for a while. It's an interesting time," he says.

Mr. Friedman argues, however, that those positions are unlikely to translate into substantial defense cuts. "Republican leadership has said that defense is on the table – and I imagine many will take up that line. But that doesn't mean they really want to cut it."

More likely, Republicans will support Gates's Pentagon budget plan, which still represents 3 percent growth over fiscal year 2011. While the Pentagon has identified \$178 billion in cuts for the five years from fiscal year 2012 to 2016, it plans to reinvest about \$100 billion of that back into the service branches. The Pentagon remains the largest single spender of federal dollars.

"I can see controlled growth," Friedman says, "but I don't think there will be a big outpouring of support for actual cuts."