



Changes in House Armed Services' makeup could reshape next year's budget battle

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The significant loss of senior House Armed Services Committee members in 2017 could make it more difficult to educate the full House about defense needs as lawmakers prepare to hash out another budget deal, analysts said.

While committee leaders are likely to keep their seats, several senior members are either retiring, running for the Senate, or in close races that could prevent them from returning to Washington next year.

Justin Johnson, an analyst with the Heritage Foundation, said this is especially important as sequestration is set to come back in full force next fiscal year absent a budget deal to raise the caps.

"This much of a loss of HASC expertise can result in less knowledge and information trickling up to the full House, particularly on debates on the [Budget Control Act] next year where educating non-HASC members is an important part of it," Johnson said. "If you have new HASC members who are themselves learning these issues, they are not as equipped to go out and educate non-HASC members."

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The loss of senior leadership on the committee in the 2000s, including Reps. Duncan Hunter Sr., Bob Stump, and Gene Taylor, is partly to blame for sequestration being implemented in the first place, according to Andrew Hunter, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and former House Armed Services Committee staffer. Much of the burden to explain these complicated issues falls to senior members, since more junior lawmakers are still taking the time to learn them themselves.

"I think it had a huge impact on the fact that sequestration went into effect because members like that would have had the stature and authority and understanding to articulate what this is really going to do to the Department of Defense," Hunter said. "There were some members who understood, but not enough to punch through the static to convince and educate colleagues about what this really means on the ground for the troops."

Both parties agree that more should be spent on defense, but Democrats want to see comparable relief for non-defense priorities, creating friction between the two parties.

The loss of the more senior committee members also could make it more difficult for the Defense Department to push its priorities through Congress, such as base reassignment and closure or military healthcare reforms, Hunter said. While new members may be able to defend the status quo, they will struggle to move the ball forward or push the envelope to get other members onboard with the Pentagon's proposals.

"It makes it harder because you have members who aren't as familiar with these issues," Hunter said. "It's less advantageous for the department to have a less senior and less knowledgeable committee."

If defense budget cuts are forced in fiscal 2018, shipbuilding could be on the chopping block because of the loss of one of its most vocal allies, Rep. Randy Forbes, R-Va.

Forbes, who serves as chairman of the House Armed Services seapower subcommittee, lost his primary election this year. While he is not the sole voice advocating for shipbuilding and seapower on Capitol Hill, he is one of the loudest.

"If those cuts come down, a lot of it depends on members of Congress sticking up for what they believe are priorities. It puts the Navy shipbuilding budget on the table as one potential target," Johnson said.

The Navy has several big-ticket programs coming down the pipeline, including the Columbia-class submarines and the Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers.

Benjamin Friedman, an analyst with the Cato Institute, said Forbes' departure from the committee may allow the Navy to change where it invests in shipbuilding, should it choose.

"Forbes' loss is especially relevant as he was essentially a lobbyist for Newport News shipbuilding and carriers especially. Maybe the Navy will have more room to shift funds out of carriers and aviation into subs and surface ships, if they are so inclined, though I'm not sure they are," he said.

Hunter said that while the people on the committee may change, the districts represented on the committee typically don't, meaning that similar interests are typically represented. Whoever wins Forbes' seat, for example, will "almost certainly" get a seat on the House Armed Services Committee because of the region's focus on the Navy and shipbuilding.

Rep. Rob Wittman, R-Va., is the favorite to take over Forbes' spot as chairman of the seapower subcommittee, Johnson said. If that happens, Wittman would leave the top job on the readiness subcommittee open, creating a domino effect.

There are other shipbuilding allies on Capitol Hill, but Johnson said lawmakers more broadly, even those who aren't natural advocates, believe that the Navy fleet needs to grow.

"It's one of those things where it's not an easy choice. I don't think anybody in Forbes' absence is going to say now we can cut the shipbuilding budget, but I do think when it comes down to some

decisions, it's just a whole bunch of bad options. In those scenarios, strong voices do make a difference," Johnson said.

Forbes' loss is just one of the several guaranteed among senior members of the House Armed Services Committee in the next Congress. Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., who is retiring, is a senior member of the Armed Services Committee as well as chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee and has been able to "help bridge the gap" between the Defense Department and Department of Veterans Affairs, Johnson said.

Rep. Joe Heck, R-Nev., has worked extensively to improve the military healthcare system, drawing from his service in the Army Reserve as a doctor. He will leave a vacancy as head of the House Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee and is running for Nevada's open Senate seat.

It's still unclear who may be the favorite to take over the opening as chairman of the personnel subcommittee, Johnson said.

While there are some broad impacts to losing members, much of the effects will be felt regionally since many members on the committee make it a priority to help out the bases and troops in their home districts through by fighting for new aircraft to be stationed at a particular base, for example.

"The new members will act like the old most likely. People join that committee to stick up for local military installations and productions facilities. It's a real estate committee really," Friedman said.

Here are the HASC members who won't be back in 2017:

Running for Senate

Rep. Joe Heck, R-Nev.

Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-Calif.

Rep. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill.

Retiring

Rep. Chris Gibson, R-N.Y.

Rep. Gwen Graham, D-Fla.

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla.

Rep. John Kline, R-Minn.

Rep. Richard Nugent, R-Fla.

Lost primary

Rep. Randy Forbes, R-Va.

