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The Washington Times

Debt deal pits Pentagon against other security agencies

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The debt deal between Congress and the president sets up what will likely be a painful fight for funding between the Pentagon and other national agencies, according to analysts and officials.

Congress structured the first round of budget cuts — almost \$1 trillion worth over 10 years — by dividing them into security and nonsecurity spending.

In fiscal 2012, which starts in October, security spending would be capped at about \$684 billion, roughly \$5 billion less than current year spending.

The State Department, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Homeland Security are included alongside the Pentagon budget in that total. Some analysts predict the State Department and Homeland Security will be gouged to protect Pentagon spending.

"It sets up a zero-sum fight with the Pentagon," said Benjamin H. Friedman, a research fellow the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.

He said the deal is "designed to protect defense spending, including pork-barrel projects." Lawmakers backing the Defense Department "hope they can dump the pain on [the] other agencies," he said.

"The VA is politically protected" because the agency provides services to American veterans, Mr. Friedman added.

Congressional officials told The Washington Times that the State Department and Homeland Security would likely be hit the hardest next year because of spending increases already built into their budgets.

At Homeland Security, those cuts could include funding for 1,000 extra Border Patrol agents hired in the last year, pay increases for the Coast Guard, and Secret Service expenses for the protection of presidential candidates in next year's campaign.

VA medical care costs also are expected to rise by \$2 billion, putting more pressure on the nondefense agencies portion of the security budget.

"Belts will be tightened all around, and Homeland Security will take some hits," said a former senior Homeland Security official. "Only time will tell if these cuts are well-considered or, in effect, throw the baby out with the bathwater."

The deal, which the president signed into law Tuesday, calls for cuts of \$917 billion in spending over the next

10 years and establishes a special congressional committee to find another \$1.5 trillion in savings.

The committee must report by late November, and Congress must act on its proposals by Christmas. If the committee fails to adopt cuts or Congress rejects its recommendations, automatic cuts totaling \$1.2 trillion would be triggered instead. Those cuts would be split equally between security and nonsecurity spending.

"How deep security cuts will be and how vicious the attendant zero-sum games wind up being will be a function of what the 'Supercommittee' is able to come up with and whether the 'triggers' are pulled," said the former Homeland Security official.

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