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CNN Relays Government Hysteria Over 'Massive' Sequester Cuts

By: Matt Hadro – February 20, 2013

After hyping the "draconian" sequester cuts set to take place March 1, CNN kept up its frenzy on Tuesday afternoon by spreading government hysteria over the \$85 billion spending reduction. Headlines sounded alarms like "Medicine, Food at Risk," "Travel Nightmare In the Making," and "U.S. justice system in jeopardy."

"President Obama is warning of dire consequences for all of us if lawmakers don't act quickly," The Situation Room host Wolf Blitzer channeled White House angst. "The President clearly wants all of us to be very, very worried about the budget axe that's about to fall," he hyped during the 6 p.m. ET hour. "The President has said it's an issue of national security," reported correspondent Joe Johns on cuts to the justice system.

Anchor Christi Paul called the looming cuts a "crisis" and blamed Congress for the sequestration without mentioning President Obama came up with the original plan in 2011:

"But there's a serious catch to this month's crisis in Washington. Just for starters, what we're looking at here is possible loss of 750,000 American jobs by the end of this year, if Congress doesn't act in the next ten days to undo automatic spending cuts that begin March 1st. Funny thing, Congress devised these cuts in 2011 as a threat, more or less, a way to force itself to agree to a smarter way to reduce the federal deficit."

CNN kept uncritically reporting White House numbers with correspondent Erin McPike hyping cuts to health services:

"Just this morning the President said, quote, hundreds of thousands of Americans will lose access to primary care and preventive care like flu vaccinations and cancer screenings. And the White House also estimates that cuts to mental health funding will leave 373,000 Americans left untreated. Now, that might mean scaling back on youth violence prevention programs that politicians on both sides of the aisle want to see more of after that shooting in Newtown."

And McPike continued to relay government hysteria that "our food supply might be at risk":

"On top of that, the Agriculture Department also thinks our food supply might be at risk, that all of the food inspectors would have a 15-day furlough, and that would mean no safety checks on meat, on poultry, or on eggs. Stores can't sell unchecked meat. And so for our viewers that would mean a lot less protein in the supermarket for a couple of weeks. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack says forced cuts would result in lost production of two billion pounds of meat, about three billion pounds of poultry and about 200 million pounds of eggs. Vilsack is already worried that stores might try to sell some unchecked meat illegally. So don't be just wary of that, but also be watching for higher prices at the supermarket."

Only at the very end of The Situation Room's report did McPike add the Republican caveat to all the frenzy: "these cuts are just estimates. This morning I spoke to several top Senate Republican officials who say that there are some smarter cuts that the White House could be making as far as health care is concerned."

A transcript of the segments, which aired on CNN on February 20, is as follows:

CHRISTI PAUL: If it sounds like the same old mumbo jumbo, it is. But there's a serious catch to this month's crisis in Washington. Just for starters, what we're looking at here is possible loss of 750,000 American jobs by the end of this year, if Congress doesn't act in the next ten days to undo automatic spending cuts that begin March 1st. Funny thing, Congress devised these cuts in 2011 as a threat, more or less, a way to force itself to agree to a smarter way to reduce the federal deficit. Now, ten days left, still no agreement. So as I mentioned, job losses are just the start of this thing. We're also talking about some vital government services potentially gone. Take a listen, if you would, to the President. He was clearly concerned as he spoke late this morning.

BARACK OBAMA, President of the United States: FBI agents will be furloughed. Federal prosecutors will have to close cases and let criminals go. Air traffic controllers and airport security will see cutbacks, which means more delays at airports across the country. Thousands of teachers and educators will be laid off. Tens of thousands of parents will have to scramble to find child care for their kids.

PAUL: The President's answer? He says to prevent those cuts, Congress would have to raise some taxes on the wealthy. Republicans don't want that. After the tax increase on the top two percent, they say they're finished raising taxes on the well-to-do. Again, with ten days left here, so we'll see what they come up with.

CHRISTI PAUL: In terms of the economic pain this would trigger, the Pew Research Center has a few more nuggets for us. Defense-related jobs could vanish by the tens of thousands due to severe cuts to the Pentagon. You see just four states there, including Georgia and Virginia, which could lose more than 100,000 jobs each over the next ten years. Cuts in grants to the states could lead to big reductions in food aid to the poor, low-income energy assistance, child care and development and other social services as well. And really this is only the start. Again, ten days left at this point.

WOLF BLITZER: Congress did it, Congress can undo it. President Obama is warning of dire consequences for all of us if lawmakers don't act quickly. We're talking about those forced budget cuts that take effect March 1st, slashing \$85 billion from government spending across the board this year. But with just ten days left, the consequences are becoming more and more alarming. President Obama outlined some of them today, told Congress let's make a deal while there is still some time.

BARACK OBAMA, President of the United States: So my door is open. I've put tough cuts and reforms on the table. I am willing to work with anybody to get this job done. None of us will get 100 percent of what we want. But nobody should want these cuts to go through because the last thing our families can afford right now is pain imposed unnecessarily by partisan recklessness and ideological rigidity here in Washington.

BLITZER: Visually, the President tried to make that point by having dozens of law enforcement officers standing behind him. Many of them potentially could lose their jobs. Our crime and

justice correspondent Joe Johns is covering that angle with the different ways the budget cuts could directly impact you. We also have René Marsh covering the air travel nightmare potentially in the making, and Erin McPike on how the food we eat could be affected as well. Let's start with Joe Johns over at the United States Supreme Court. Joe?

JOE JOHNS: Wolf, the courts have been looking at this issue for a long time. The Federal Bar Association says a quarter of federal court employees might have to be furloughed as well. Jury trials might have to be suspended because there's no money to pay the members of the juries. The justice system is going to be affected across the board, especially the Justice Department. The President has said it's an issue of national security.

OBAMA: FBI agents will be furloughed. Federal prosecutors will have to close cases and let criminals go.

JOHNS: For example, the FBI would have to cut something like 2300 employees, hundreds of agents. Others would be affected as well, including border security agents. Also, correctional officers who work at federal prisons. However, one man I spoke to with the CATO Institute in Washington, D.C., told me there is a silver lining.

DAN MITCHELL, senior fellow, CATO Institute: It's not asking too much for the government to take a tiny bit of trimming –

JOHNS: We do know there are places at the Justice Department to cut. For example, there was a report that came out just last year from the General Accountability Office that said that there's as much as \$33 billion spent since the year 2005 on crime prevention programs that are often duplicative and counterproductive. So certainly some places to cut there. Now let's go to René Marsh at BWI airport.

RENÉ MARSH: That's right, Joe. If you're flying out of airports like BWI, you are really looking for a tough time if these forced budgets do actually go through. Let's talk about the FAA. They are expecting to see an 8.2 percent budget cut. That translates to about \$627 million this year. That could mean furloughs for some employees. Let's talk about the TSA. They could also see furloughs. They could also see cuts in overtime. So I want to show you what that means for you, the traveler. That could very well mean that wait times at security lines will be more than an hour. We also know that wait times at customs could go up by 50 percent. Flight delays, that would be simply because there would be fewer air traffic controllers and they could also just be a drag on the economy. You have business people who are traveling, and instead of conducting business, they could be stuck in those long lines. So we spoke to the airport director here at BWI and he paints a very vivid picture of what travel could look like.

PAUL WIEDEFELD: If you think back to post-9/11, some of the issues that we had when you just didn't have the volume of people on board to handle all of the passengers, that's what you could be looking at.

MARSH: Okay. Well despite that, he sounds pretty confident that things will still remain safe as far as flying but he made it very clear, things will be slow-moving. From here, let's go on over to Erin with more.

ERIN MCPIKE: Thanks, René. Now these forced budget cuts would also lead to less money for public health programs as well as less research at the National Institutes of Health. Just this morning the President said, quote, hundreds of thousands of Americans will lose access to

primary care and preventive care like flu vaccinations and cancer screenings. And the White House also estimates that cuts to mental health funding will leave 373,000 Americans left untreated.

Now, that might mean scaling back on youth violence prevention programs, the politicians on both sides of the aisle want to see more of after that shooting in Newtown. On top of that, the Agriculture Department also thinks our food supply might be at risk, that all of the food inspectors would have a 15-day furlough, and that would mean no safety checks on meat, on poultry, or on eggs. Stores can't sell unchecked meat. And so for our viewers that would mean a lot less protein in the supermarket for a couple of weeks. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack says forced cuts would result in lost production of two billion pounds of meat, about three billion pounds of poultry and about 200 million pounds of eggs. Vilsack is already worried that stores might try to sell some unchecked meat illegally. So don't be just wary of that, but also be watching for higher prices at the supermarket. But one thing we need to make sure that we remember, Wolf, is these cuts are just estimates. This morning I spoke to several top Senate Republican officials who say that there are some smarter cuts that the White House could be making as far as health care is concerned. There's a \$7 billion slush fund in ObamaCare. They could use that as opposed to some cuts to the National Institutes of Health.

WOLF BLITZER: The President clearly wants all of us to be very, very worried about the budget axe that's about to fall. He's warning that a lot of people will lose their jobs if forced spending cuts are allowed to take effect ten days from now. And he says many more Americans will suffer in some way. Listen to these clips of his newest attempt to light a fire under Congress.

BLITZER: That's a short version of what the President had to say. Let's go in depth with our chief White House correspondent, Jessica Yellin, who is here. This is a big issue right now.

YELLIN: It really is, Wolf. And it's just ten days now until these forced budget cuts go into effect. Top administration officials tell me if that happens, the President believes the politics are on his side.

YELLIN: (voice over) With Congress out of town, President Obama took to the bully pulpit, warning about the effects of forced spending cuts that hit every part of government next Friday.

BARACK OBAMA, President of the United States: There is a smarter way to do this, to reduce our deficits without harming our economy.

YELLIN: He's talking about more than \$1 trillion in painful cuts that can still be avoided if Congress reaches agreement on deficit reduction. The package of cuts came from the 2011 debt ceiling deal, and it was never meant to go into effect. During the presidential campaign, Mr. Obama said as much.

OBAMA: It will not happen.

YELLIN: But Congress has not been able to reach a compromise that would replace these cuts with smarter deficit reduction. So the sword is about to fall. Among the immediate effects, funding cuts for 70,000 kids on Head Start, possible five-hour waits to get through security at the airport. Deployment of one aircraft carrier has been postponed, and the Navy has suspended overhaul of another. That's not to mention temporary layoffs, including first responders, like the ones behind the President.

OBAMA: Now, if Congress allows this meat cleaver approach to take place, it will jeopardize our military readiness, it will eviscerate job-creating investment –

YELLIN: In a statement, Senator Mitch McConnell slammed the President, saying today's event at the White House proves, once again, that more than three months after the November election, President Obama still prefers campaign events to common sense bipartisan action. Still, no compromise. The crux of the dispute, Democrats want revenue, Republicans want spending cuts, including more changes to entitlement programs like Social Security. One prominent budget expert said the President's legacy rests on finding a solution.

ALAN SIMPSON, former U.S. Senator: If he can't cut the mustard with solvency of Social Security, under honest appraisals of the trustees, he will have a failed presidency.

YELLIN: Now the idea for the sequester came from the White House , but 174 House Republicans voted for it. So everyone is in the same boat on this one. And Wolf, Kate, I'll tell you, most people I talk to in Washington expect next Friday's deadline to come and go without a deal, so we should all brace for these cuts to come into effect.

BLITZER: It doesn't look like there's heavy-duty negotiations going on between these various sides. So we'll see what happens.