



Gates sees opportunity in crisis

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Defense Secretary Robert Gates sees opportunity in the pressure to cut Pentagon spending: opportunity to attack politically sensitive issues such as military health care and retirement benefits. Opportunity to decide what kind of role the military should play in the security of the world.

And opportunity to leave one last mark on the department he has led for 4 ½ years.

“We may have a political window here where we can look at the long-term interests of the military and do some smart things,” Gates said Tuesday, answering a question after his speech at the American Enterprise Institute.

The speech, one of his last major policy statements before he leaves office June 30, was the closing argument in Gates’s month-long campaign to steer the debate on defense cuts. President Barack Obama sparked the renewed debate April 13 by calling for an extra \$400 billion in savings over 12 years.

Obama’s announcement caught Gates and other Pentagon officials by surprise, coming after an eight-month effort to trim \$78 billion from the budget in fiscal 2012. That effort included canceling weapons programs seen as too costly or outmoded, restructuring the defense bureaucracy and reducing the size of the Army and Marine Corps.

Gates has said everything is on the table in the new budget review he ordered last week. But he also expressed strong preferences Tuesday for scrutinizing military pay and benefits, preserving a force with global reach and protecting programs designed to modernize outmoded equipment.

He also has made clear that the process he hands off to his likely successor – CIA Director Leon Panetta – will produce options for possible cuts, but Congress and the president will have to assume the risk and make the hard choices.

“If we are going to reduce the resources and the size of the U.S. military, people need to make conscious choices about what the implications are for the security of the country, as well as for the variety of military operations we have around the world if lower-priority missions are scaled back or eliminated,” Gates said in his speech.

“They need to understand what it could mean for a smaller pool of troops and their families if America is forced into a protracted land war again — yes, the kind no defense secretary should recommend anytime soon, but one we may not be able to avoid. To shirk this discussion of risks and consequences — and the hard decisions that must follow — would regard as managerial cowardice.”

Despite the pressure for shared sacrifice from the Pentagon to ease the nation’s \$14.3 trillion national debt, Gates’s proposals will likely be contentious. As war operations in Afghanistan and Iraq wind down, liberals and libertarians are pushing for dramatic reductions in the nation’s global military profile. Congressional champions of new weapons programs — such as the alternate engine for the F-35 jet fighter — have fought Gates’s

attempts to kill those programs and redirect the money. And the retirement and health benefits issue has lived up to its nickname of “the third rail” — no one wants to touch them, much less actually scale them back.

“I don’t think there’s going to be the political basis to do deep defense cuts in the next two years,” said Michael O’Hanlon, a defense analyst at the Brookings Institution.

Controlling the spiraling cost of military benefits is critical not just to the short-term budget picture but also to the long-term health of the armed forces. Military health care costs soared 300 percent from fiscal 2001 to fiscal 2012 and are expected to total about 10 percent of the Pentagon budget by 2015.

But when Gates tried in 2009 to increase fees for Tricare, the military health care system, the resulting outcry quickly dissuaded him. A proposal this year to increase fees \$2.50 a month for individual retirees and \$5 a month for their families would be the first since 1994 if Congress passes it, but even that has sparked bipartisan opposition.

Gates also has faced congressional pushback over cuts he has already made: Virginia lawmakers united in bipartisan opposition to his decision last year to deactivate the Joint Forces Command in Norfolk, a move that contributed to the \$78 billion in savings.

And the F-35’s second engine has become the defense program that won’t die. Gates killed it after Congress cut off funding for the program earlier this year, but the manufacturer’s decision to fund further development has prompted the House to consider resurrecting it.

Almost immediately after Obama made his call for deeper spending cuts, both doves and budget hawks saw an opportunity to force a reassessment of U.S. defense strategy. U.S. defense spending represents about half of the world’s total, and many argue that it is time for other countries to share the burden.

“The real problem is a lack of capability on the part of others around the world,” including U.S. allies, said Christopher Preble of the libertarian-oriented Cato Institute.

“Our global force posture, I know, is an issue of contention on the Hill,” Gates said. But he argued that “I have yet to see evidence that would dissuade me from this fundamental belief: that America does have a special position and set of responsibilities on this planet. ... This status provides enormous benefits — for allies, partners, and others abroad to be sure, but in the final analysis the greatest beneficiaries are the American people, in terms of our security, our prosperity, and our freedom.”

One fundamental idea likely to be offered for lawmakers to consider: the Cold War-era doctrine of being able to fight two wars simultaneously, which Gates has suggested may be outdated. Yet he also has warned that abandoning the strategy would bring increased risk to the United States.

“Our record of predicting where we have used military force since Vietnam is perfect: We have never once gotten it right,” he said.

