



## Hagel's Military Budget Cuts Will Start a Fight in the Republican Party

By Matthew Cooper

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It was like a throwback to the world of Franklin Roosevelt, Charles Lindbergh and the fight over America's entry into World War II. This week, the Pentagon leaked a preview of its 2015 Budget and it contains plans to reduce the size of the Army to its smallest number since 1940--about 440,000 troops, down from the current 522,000.

Everyone expected a decline. After all, we're poised to leave Afghanistan. But the number--and passing the 1940 benchmark--was still startling. In his trademark restrained and respectful style, Dick Cheney used a Fox News Channel appearance to declare Barack Obama "would rather spend the money on Food Stamps" than on keeping America strong.

Leaving aside Cheney's intemperance, there is a debate over how big the military should be as war recedes--one that has echoes throughout American history. Everytime the U.S. ends a giant military effort--the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Cold War--the military shrinks and the nation hopes it won't have to build it up again, only before long to have to rebuild its arsenal.

The same is true now that American prosecution of the war in Afghanistan is coming to an end--perhaps as early as this year. On Tuesday, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel announced the Pentagon was drawing up contingency plans for a complete pullout by the end of the year.

The announcement was less significant than it appeared at first sight. American forces are due to leave during the next year anyway and the impetus behind the pronouncement may have been as much diplomatic as military--an effort to put pressure on Afghan President Hamid Karzai to stop being an impediment to an American exit and be prepared for his armed forces to take over the fighting.

Throughout history, fights over defense budgets and policies have cleaved the political parties. The pre-World War II political landscape was dominated by isolationists like Lindbergh, the aviation hero, but also included those open to aid to allies and intervention like GOP presidential nominee Wendell Willkie.

This time, the GOP will reflexively oppose the cuts being offered by Hagel, a former Republican Senator from Nebraska and a decorated Vietnam War Veteran. (Cue John McCain, who wasted no time labeling the cuts "a serious mistake.")

At the moment, no major GOP figure can afford to embrace an Obama defense proposal. But as the 2016 presidential primaries draw closer, more libertarian minded members might heed the call of the Cato Institute's Christopher A. Preble, who called Hagel's plan "a few steps in the right direction."

It's easy to picture a Republican primary in 2016 where the libertarian minded Senator Rand Paul from Kentucky defends a smaller Army, while the likes of House member from Wisconsin Paul Ryan or former Florida governor Jeb Bush want a bigger force.

While Democrats, too, will square off along similar lines, the division in the GOP between interventionist neo-conservatives and libertarian budget and federal government shrinker are the battle lines of the ideological war for the party's soul currently setting old school Republicans against Tea Party insurgents.

But no matter how the sides bicker, less is at stake than might be thought. No one is talking about taking America back to a time when we had only token power in a threatening world. The drop in Army strength to 522,000 is not that far south of the 490,00 that's already been scheduled.

Yes, The number of troops in a Hagel Defense budget would see the number of Army troops sink to pre-1940 levels, but America's defense strength would still be overwhelming compared to the armed forces of the rest of the world.

There would be 11 aircraft carrier groups -- far ahead of Russia and China which have one each and neither a match for ours. America's old Cold War nuclear triad of bombers, submarines and missiles would remain intact. And some big new projects like the \$400 billion F-35 Joint Strike Fighter would keep rolling off the assembly line, albeit at a slower clip.

The U.S. would still be the most formidable military in the world. The question is, by how much? And could it conduct two land wars simultaneously, as we did in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Besides, this is just a proposal. The budget process, even in times of comity, is a messy scrum of the defense industry, veterans, pols, and everyone else, since Pentagon spending touches so many aspects of American life.

No wonder Hagel is asking for authority to push some of these decisions to a nonpartisan commission exempt from Congress's give and take processes.

The so-called Base Realignment and Closure commission (BRAC) helped Congress through tough votes on more than 350 installations when it was first formed in 1990 at the end of the Cold War.

This time, however, if he is to make the radical shift in spending he thinks necessary, Hagel will need all the help he can get.