



Responsible Pentagon cuts could work

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By: Jonathan Bydlak – March 4, 2013

At a shipbuilding site in Virginia last month, President Obama said of the sequester, "These cuts are wrong. They're not smart, they're not fair."

That really is up to him.

Eighteen months after enthusiastically signing the sequester into law, the president has squandered his vast budgetary authority by choosing to reduce spending indiscriminately. The aim of this brazenly political gambit is to demonstrate that no amount of spending reduction is warranted and that any slowdown in the rate of federal spending increases will necessarily cause great pain for all Americans.

This applies particularly to Pentagon spending, where the administration's current plans to furlough civilian employees, hold deployment of the USS Harry Truman, and delay refit of the USS Abraham Lincoln are entirely arbitrary choices.

However, were the president actually inclined to find a "balanced approach" to deficit reduction, there exist a number of opportunities for substantial savings in the Pentagon's massive \$680 billion budget that will not impact the country's ability to defend itself.

Plenty of ideas have been floated to address needless Pentagon over-spending. Here are three: one from a conservative U.S. Senator, another from a libertarian policy organization and a third from a progressive think tank. These savings would begin in the first year of implementation.

- Oklahoma Republican Sen. Tom Coburn has outlined a plan to save \$18 billion a year by reforming TRICARE, health insurance military retirees receive for life. It would require them to pay health insurance premiums similar to those civilians pay in the private sector.
- The Cato Institute proposes a responsible redefinition of weapon systems contracts that would save \$14.5 billion annually. This would entail a slight reduction in the procurement of warships, fighter jets, helicopters and satellite systems during peacetime.

- The Pentagon could reduce the number of military personnel in Europe and Asia, saving \$12 billion per year according to the Center for American Progress. This troop drawdown would occur in regions where there is no imminent threat to American interests.

Along with a series of efficiency recommendations offered by former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, we have identified \$56.3 billion in easy savings in the Pentagon for the 2014 fiscal year. Not only are these reforms more than enough to cover the \$46 billion in Pentagon spending reductions required by the sequester, but they also eliminate duplicative spending while permitting military personnel to keep at least a 1.7% cost-of-living pay increase going forward.

Truthfully, identifying opportunities to reform outdated programs is easy. The biggest challenge is the difficult politics of reducing spending.

The sequester was born of politics, designed to incentivize a congressional "super-committee" to agree on minor reductions to future spending increases in an effort to balance increased federal borrowing. When the super-committee failed to agree on anything, the clock started ticking for the Obama Administration to execute the \$85 billion in cuts to both Pentagon and discretionary spending for 2013. But when the time came in January for these spending reductions to take effect, Congress delayed them until March. Even as the cuts go into effect now, some members of Congress want to cancel them all together.

If we do not hold politicians accountable to the promises they have made, we will continue down this road of delays and half-measures until we are left only with higher taxes, crippling government debt and a much weaker economy.

The sequester can be done -- and it must be done -- intelligently. Instead of posturing for political points, the president needs to assume the mantle of leadership and target these relatively minor spending reductions to the places where they are needed most.