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Rubio, Paul reflect GOP split on defense cuts

By Seth McLaughlin- February 13, 2013

The two Republican rebuttals to the State of the Union address Tuesday night reinforced the GOP's commitment to cutting spending — but the dueling responses from Sens. Marco Rubio and Rand Paul also exposed a split in the party over how that philosophy applies to the defense budget.

Mr. Rubio, delivering the official GOP response, said the \$86 billion sequester includes “devastating cuts to our military” that should be replaced with the “responsible spending reforms” that Republicans offered last year.

But Mr. Paul, speaking for a tea party group, said the GOP must “realize that military spending is not immune to waste and fraud.”

“Not only should the sequester stand, many pundits say the sequester really needs to be at least \$4 trillion to avoid another downgrade of America's credit rating,” said Mr. Paul, who represents Kentucky. “Both parties will have to agree to cut, or we will never fix our fiscal mess.”

Kevin F. Kelly, vice president of Van Scoyoc Associates and a former senior Democratic staffer on the Senate Appropriations Committee, said the competing messages reflect “a fundamental shift in the previous solidarity within the Republican Party during the Bush era — first George H.W. Bush and then George W. Bush — when they were united on national security.”

“Part of that is that the Pentagon has become such a large part of the budget,” Mr. Kelly said, alluding to how defense now accounts for about 20 percent of federal spending.

Christopher A. Preble, of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, said Mr. Rubio and Mr. Paul represent “two strands of thinking within the Republican Party” over the role the military should play on the global stage.”

“To oversimplify, Rubio thinks it should do more and Sen. Paul thinks it should do less,” Mr. Preble said. “I do think Rand Paul is tapping into this anxiety and even some resentment about the party establishment and who they deem to be the appropriate spokespeople — in particular on some issues where they are not seen as being very credible as far as military spending being off the table.”

The across-the-board cuts were set into motion by the 2011 Budget Control Act, which tasked a bipartisan supercommittee with trimming the deficit by \$1.2 trillion over 10 years through tax and entitlement reforms. But the committee failed to do so, triggering automatic reductions in defense and domestic programs on Jan. 1.

Lawmakers struck a last-minute deal to put off the cuts until next month — setting the stage for another round of high-stakes fiscal fights.

Since then, some Republican lawmakers have called for the defense cuts to be replaced — one plan calls for offsetting the cuts with savings found through attrition in the federal workforce.

“Sequestration, if implemented, will cut every ship, aircraft, tank and truck program; all research and development initiatives; and every post, camp and station in the Department of Defense,” Sen. John McCain, Arizona Republican, said last week.

The Pentagon’s top brass, meanwhile, continued to sound the alarm this week on Capitol Hill, where they testified that the \$46 billion defense sequester would hurt the military. They said it would lead to 22-day furloughs for 800,000 civilian employees, curtailed training, reduced ship and aircraft maintenance and the loss of 100,000 active-duty troops.

In his fourth State of the Union address, President Obama said “sudden, harsh, arbitrary cuts would jeopardize our military readiness,” devastate education, energy, and medical research, and cost hundreds of thousands of jobs.

“Now, some in this Congress have proposed preventing only the defense cuts by making even bigger cuts to things like education and job training; Medicare and Social Security benefits. That idea is even worse,” Mr. Obama said, arguing that the sequester should be offset with a combination of spending cuts and additional revenue.

Republicans say the president's call for more revenue is a nonstarter, and sound resigned to the idea that the sequester cuts would take effect in two weeks — whether they like it or not.

“It's pretty clear to me that the sequester is going to go into effect,” Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican, said Tuesday. “Read my lips,” Mr. McConnell said, “I'm not interested in an eleventh-hour negotiation.”

Mr. Kelly said that could change in the coming weeks as the public becomes more familiar with the severity of the cuts. “The expectation is that the defense cuts are so bad that the Republicans will have to compromise [on revenue] and then” Mr. Obama and congressional Democrats will have to back off some of the defense cuts, he said. Republican lawmakers also want Democrats to accept entitlement reforms.

Some Republicans, though, say the sequester might be the only way to get Mr. Obama and Congress to swallow “real” spending cuts.

Rep. Mike Pompeo, Kansas Republican, said in a Politico forum Wednesday that voters will see the cuts as “a home run.”

“We're doing what the American people asked the United States House of Representatives to do in 2010 when I came here. We're reducing the size and scope of the federal government,” Mr. Pompeo said.

Rep. Steve Scalise, chairman of the conservative Republican Study Committee, told The Washington Times that “the only thing worse than the defense sequester is not to have the sequester at all.”

“It is the only way to show that we are serious about controlling spending,” said Mr. Scalise, Louisiana Republican. “We can't kick this can down the road. It has been kicked down the road so many times that it barely resembles what it used to look like.”

Read more: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/feb/13/rubio-paul-reflect-gop-split-on-defense-cuts/#ixzz2Kt5yeu6C>

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