

Article

Sequestration Means Cuts We Can't Afford

This article first appeared in *Roll Call*, September 20, 2012.



Ike Skelton
202.378.2330
ike.skelton@huschblackwell.com

Last year, Congress passed \$487 billion in defense cuts as part of the Budget Control Act of 2011. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has said these cuts will be tough to make but are feasible without threatening our troops or our national security. However, by failing to reach agreement on additional cuts also called for by this law, Congress has triggered “sequestration,” a second round of even deeper cuts to our military that will take effect starting in January 2013.

Taken together, these additional cuts, totaling \$500 billion over 10 years, represent an unprecedented reduction of the defense budget during wartime, made more shocking because they're the result of partisan gridlock rather than thoughtful policy. The additional cuts resulting from sequestration will be especially devastating because they fall automatically across-the-board, slashing every single Pentagon program equally and indiscriminately, from ballpoint pens for the Pentagon to body armor for soldiers and Marines. No one thinks this would be a responsible way to proceed.

Troops on the front lines will be the first to feel the disastrous effects of sequestration cuts. Panetta has said it would delay wartime contracts and weaken oversight. In effect, Congress could be planting the seeds for several hundred Halliburton scandals: food and other supplies arriving weeks late to forward operating bases, fuel shortages grounding planes and helicopters and troops waiting even longer for mental health evaluations.

Sequestration will also erode America's military superiority over the next decade by cutting even the most essential defense programs. Any military commander will tell you that our ability to dominate the battlefield is not only dependent on critical thinking but is fueled by superior aircraft, ships, weapons and intelligence. Sequestration would cripple each of these categories, virtually interfere with professional military education at our war colleges, ending the modernization of fighter jets, combat ships, helicopters, ground vehicles, drone aircraft and satellite technologies.

Without a thorough study of the art of war and first-rate equipment, the U.S. military will be far less able to deter gathering conflicts or quickly resolve those conflicts we are unable to avoid. The “Powell Doctrine” of risking our troops only

when backed up by overwhelming force and a clear path to decisive victory could be at risk.

With our unique portfolio of global responsibilities, we could find it difficult to simultaneously pursue terrorists, contain Iran and North Korea, counter a rising China and deal with exploding hot spots such as Syria today.

Those that say we can risk skipping one or two generations of military development are poor students of military history. America rose from a young, regional power to a formidable military force over the course of World War I alone. And Germany rose from the ashes of that war to threaten all of Europe in less than two decades.

Today, technology has accelerated the pace of change, and our adversaries are certainly not sitting on their hands. Russia and China are both building sixth-generation stealth fighters, while Iran and North Korea race to develop nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles. The rise of cyber weapons puts America's highly networked economy and society at particular risk. We can choose to delay our defenses against these developing threats, but the threats themselves won't wait.

Many longtime Pentagon critics are embracing sequestration as a way to reduce the defense budget and, in their minds, enforce fiscal responsibility. But sequestration will have exactly the opposite effect. Falling indiscriminately on every program, the cuts will disrupt construction projects and development programs, creating costly delays. They will reduce order numbers, thereby increasing unit costs and eliminating economies of scale.

Taxpayers will get less for their dollar and troops will get less—period. As a cost-saving measure, sequestration is like a shortcut that ends up taking twice as long.

Congress faces grave challenges that demand hearty debate and creative compromises, not quick fixes that will create bigger problems down the road. I have every confidence that cooler heads will soon prevail and that Congress will reach a historic compromise that will save us from the blind budget cuts no one really wants. ■

©2012 Husch Blackwell LLP. All rights reserved.