

Failed Budget Agreement Weakens National Defense

VFW demands that Congress finish the job

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The new national commander of America's oldest and largest combat veterans' organization says Congress' failure to reach a budget agreement has forced the Department of Defense to actively plan to power down in size, capability and scope.

"We downsize our military after every war, but at least we used to wait until the war ended before doing it," said William A. Thien, who was elected July 24 to lead the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and its Auxiliaries. "Congress' inability to compromise on a budget deal will gut our current force as well as future forces, all because of partisan politics that doesn't put America at the top of their agendas."

In a Pentagon press conference Wednesday, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel unveiled the findings of a DOD Strategic Choices and Management Review that was built around three potential scenarios that reduce defense spending by \$150 billion, \$250 billion or \$500 billion over the next 10 years. All three budget reduction scenarios are in addition to the \$487 billion cut in defense spending already required by the Budget Control Act of 2011.

With the only certainty being the defense budget will be cut by "x" amount over the next decade, military planners are moving forward with two opposing strategic positions: either trade size for capability or trade capability for size, neither of which will lead to a stronger or more capable military than what was created post-9/11.

Secretary Hagel mentioned a variety of potential budget-cutting options based on the severity of the reduction, to include on the personnel side smaller military pay raises, reduced allowances, less overseas cost-of-living adjustments, and limiting access to military health care for working-age retirees. Severe force reductions also under consideration would shrink the active Army to 380,000 soldiers, the Marine Corps to as low as 150,000, reduce the number of carrier battle groups from 11 to eight, and retire aging Air Force bombers and other aircraft, among many other options.

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All of these worst-case proposals have the full attention of the VFW, because most of this could have been avoided had Congress just done its job and passed a budget.

“Sequestration became the law of the land because of the failure of the so-called Super Committee to cut \$1.2 trillion from discretionary spending over a 10-year period,” said Thien, from Georgetown, Ind., a Vietnam veteran who served in the Navy from 1969-1974 and later for five years in the Army National Guard.

“Then the mandatory sequester that no one believed would happen happened, and it’s the Defense Department that’s getting hit the hardest,” he said.

Thien said Congress’ failure to reach a budget agreement weakens the country. It restricts the military’s ability to realistically train in the air, ground, sea, space and cyber arenas. It is also forcing the services to grab money where they can, principally from readiness and modernization, in order to protect U.S. combat forces in Afghanistan from the chaos Congress created back here.

In concluding his press conference, Secretary Hagel said “It is the responsibility of our nation’s leadership to work together to replace the mindless and irresponsible policy of sequestration. It is unworthy of the service and sacrifice of our nation’s men and women in uniform and their families.”

The VFW agrees.

“Today I am asking more than 1.9 million VFW and Auxiliary members to demand that their members of Congress finish the job they started,” said Thien. “Operating with an unknown budget impacts readiness, it hurts the troops and their families, and the message it sends to our enemies is that America’s political leadership can’t get their priorities straight. That must change.”

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