

# WebMemo



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## A Dangerous Debt Ceiling Deal

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The deep cuts in defense spending envisioned in the just-announced debt ceiling deal<sup>1</sup> raise a fundamental question for Americans: Will we let a deal stand that promises to end American security as we know it? Or will Americans demand that the deal, born of crisis-driven politics in Washington, be abandoned as they come to understand what is at stake?

The deal promises to raise the debt ceiling by the highest amount ever—more than \$2 trillion—while reducing spending by close to \$1 trillion over the next decade.<sup>2</sup> It envisions 6 percent and 7.5 percent cuts in defense spending from the President's budget request in February for fiscal years 2012 and 2013, respectively. It sets a non-binding goal of \$1.5 trillion worth of deficit reduction to be recommended by the congressional Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, which the legislation creates.

If Congress does not enact a sufficient deficit-reduction plan by this December, the deal calls for an automatic sequestration that would authorize making half of the cuts only in security spending,<sup>3</sup> with the bulk coming out of the Department of Defense. Thus a single federal agency—one that is actually doing a good job and serving a constitutionally mandated role—will have to bear nearly the same amount of cuts as all the remaining domestic agencies combined, including Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Education, Interior, Energy, Justice, and Labor.

As if that were not enough, there are no automatic cuts in entitlement benefits. We will have to

sacrifice the future security of all Americans without actually getting at the cause of the debt crisis—namely, runaway spending on Social Security and the other big social entitlements.

**Liberals Closing in on the Ultimate Goal.** The politics of this deal are obvious. Liberals have long been trying to force conservatives to choose between tax hikes and defense cuts, and this deal would force them to make that choice. Liberals want to preserve high-cost social programs. They would like to raise taxes to “pay” for them, but if they cannot get that, they will take big defense cuts to save entitlements and other domestic programs.

In the future, the GOP will have to accept the defense cuts, raise taxes, or abandon the deal altogether, none of which they will want to do. Many liberals, on the other hand, will be happy with any of these outcomes.

Essentially, this deal just postpones the day of reckoning on entitlement spending while sacrificing America's security interests. It is hard to imagine a more short-sighted political decision by Congress.

**America Cannot Afford Defense Cuts.** If the defense cuts in the debt limit deal take effect, the cost to national security will be huge. Do we really

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need to remind ourselves that we are still a nation at war? These cuts will only worsen the already looming problem of declining military readiness. Over the past year, a full half of the Navy fleet was either underway daily or engaged, which has reduced the fleet's quality and condition. The Air Force, which has been involved in combat operations for 20 years, has seen aircraft tragically fall out of the sky, likely because of wear and tear.

Engaged in 10 years of war, the armed forces are stretched thin and reaching the breaking point. Has anyone advocating defense cuts thought about how cutting up to \$1 trillion in defense would break the armed forces as we know them? All the service chiefs have indicated that defense cuts of even half of what is envisioned in this debt ceiling deal would force "fundamental changes" in America's military strategy. Has anyone involved in these debt ceiling talks actually asked themselves—or those service chiefs—what effect these cuts would have on military strategy?

To meet the military spending cuts of the debt deal, at least one and possibly two Navy carrier strike groups will disappear. A large part of the U.S. missile defense program will have to be scaled back, exposing millions of Americans unnecessarily to nuclear attack. Overseas bases will have to be shut down, meaning that it will be far more expensive and take far longer to move U.S. forces where they need to be in the future—assuming they can even get there at all.

There will be only enough armed forces to fight at best one military operation overseas (historically we have been able to fight two or even more). Some might say this is fine because they are tired of the Iraq and Afghan wars—but America's enemies are not tired of threatening us. What do we do if the U.S. is hit with another terrorist attack orchestrated from some safe haven overseas, and at the same

time a nuclear-armed Iran starts to shut down U.S. access to Middle Eastern oil? Do we just show up at the United Nations and complain?

**Future Weapons Required.** Next-generation weapons like a new bomber, a stealth helicopter, and a new nuclear submarine will never see the light of day. If you think America is so far ahead of the rest of the world that we can afford to miss the next generation of weapons modernization, think again. Russia and China are developing next-generation stealth fighters, and Russia is developing new nuclear missiles. If we stand still while they move ahead, it is only a matter of time before they catch up and possibly surpass us in some key categories of weapons capabilities.

Some defense experts predict that cuts as draconian as those envisioned in this deal could kill the nuclear triad of bombers, missiles, and submarines. Bombers are already aging, and there is no program to build a new one, while a next-generation nuclear submarine could be axed. Nuclear stockpiles will be reduced, and promised modernization will likely be dropped.

The triad has been the foundation of national security since the end of World War II, and it is pure folly to fool with it. President Dwight Eisenhower cut conventional forces drastically in the 1950s after World War II, but he at least had the wisdom to bolster America's strategic deterrent to make up for it. The path we are now on will gut both conventional and nuclear forces, leaving the U.S. exposed for decades.

If these cuts go through, we are facing the end of American security as we know it. There is no escaping the fact that we are making a strategic retreat—not through a debate about defense, but through decisions about money completely divorced from a discussion of defense.

1. "Text of Budget Control Act Amendment," August 1, 2011, at [http://rules.house.gov/Media/file/PDF\\_112\\_1/Floor\\_Text/DEBT\\_016\\_xml.pdf](http://rules.house.gov/Media/file/PDF_112_1/Floor_Text/DEBT_016_xml.pdf) (August 1, 2011).
2. The White House, "Fact Sheet: Bipartisan Debt Deal: A Win for the Economy and Budget Discipline," August 1, 2011, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheet-victory-bipartisan-compromise-economy-american-people> (August 1, 2011).
3. "Raw Data: Democratic Fact Sheet on Reducing the Deficit, Raising the Debt Limit and Avoiding Default," Fox News.com, July 31, 2011, at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2011/07/31/raw-data-democratic-fact-sheet-on-reducing-deficit-raising-debt-limit-and/> (August 1, 2011).

This is playing with fire. As we have seen many times in history, when America disarms (often after wars) and leaves itself exposed, some threat comes rushing in to awaken us. Then we have to build up our forces frantically, at a cost much higher and with far greater loss of life than if we had maintained our deterrent.

**An Unworkable Deal.** In the end, it is hard to see how this debt ceiling deal is sustainable. The Joint Select Committee theoretically is supposed to consider entitlement reductions, but sequestration applies only to discretionary spending, which includes 50 percent of defense. Knowing full well that the Republicans will not support tax increases and the Democrats will balk at entitlement cuts, the sequestration “trigger” is rigged to ensure that the sword will fall on the defense budget. If after careful review Congress concludes that such draconian defense or other cuts are not acceptable, the only choice at that point is to change the nature of the process and abandon the main elements of the deal. If that happens, then this entire deal will have been little more than a ruse to raise the debt ceiling without deep reductions.

This deal aside, Congress’s mission in the year ahead will be figuring out how to sustain robust defense spending so we can modernize the armed forces, meet the global commitment required to keep America safe, and reduce the strain on an

overworked force. Congress must approve the level of funding that will not put our troops at risk or leave Americans vulnerable—providing an average of \$720 billion per year for defense for each of the next five fiscal years in addition to the funding needed for ongoing contingency operations. Congress should work to make the defense budget as efficient as possible and redirect the dollars achieved by any reforms in the military to offsetting the cost of modernizing the military and developing next-generation equipment.<sup>4</sup>

America is different from other countries for many reasons, but surely one of the biggest is that we are masters of our fate. We are fortunate to have an armed force that not only defends us but also keeps us from being at the mercy of other countries, many of whom wish us ill.

If Americans do not wake up soon and see what is at stake, we will surely lose that mastery and, with it, our most cherished freedom.

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4. Edwin Feulner, “A Checklist for Congress,” *Heritage Foundation Commentary*, November 8, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/commentary/2010/11/a-checklist-for-congress>.