

Deadlocked Congress delays decisions

A WIDELY PREDICTED FAILURE IN THE nation's capital happened so quickly that even Washington insiders were taken aback. Without surprises, drama, or even a public announcement, Capitol Hill's 'supercommittee' failed to meet a November 21 deadline for finding \$1.2 trillion in budget cuts to be made over the next decade.

Created in a compromise between President Barack Obama and congressional Republicans, the bipartisan supercommittee never really had much chance to agree on huge, unpopular fiscal changes. Under the terms of the deal that raised the debt ceiling last summer, a process called sequestration will now inflict across-the-board cuts of \$1.2 trillion beginning in January 2013, with half coming from defense programs.

At least that is how the law is written as of now.

Observers in Washington wonder whether Congress will choose to avoid the doomsday mechanism of sequestration by enacting a law to overturn existing legislation, thereby postponing difficult budget decisions. Obama has said he will veto such a measure. Lawmakers purposely timed the sequestration to occur shortly after an election, in hopes of minimizing political discord when it occurs.



Rep. Howard P. McKeon

If no change is made, sequestration will bring colossal defense cuts with a tectonic effect on the aerospace industry and jobs. Supporters say the U.S. is powerful enough that it can absorb big cuts in order to take a painful step toward fiscal responsibility. Others say the nation cannot handle the loss to its industrial base, or the effects on warfighting capability that sequestration will bring. Lost in much of this chatter is the issue of military capabilities. One widely held view is that the U.S. can still be a globe-girdling superpower even after major cuts.

Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, who was expected to be a budget hawk when he came to the Pentagon in February 2011, has instead become a vocal advocate for keeping defense spending at current levels. Now, Panetta is warning that the \$600 billion in automatic cuts, combined with reductions made earlier this year, would force the Pentagon to slash its spending by 23% across the board. That includes funding to buy hardware such as UAS, surveillance systems, and a new bomber. He warns of "devastating, automatic, across-the-board cuts that will tear a seam in the nation's defense." He adds, "The half-trillion in additional cuts demanded by sequester would lead to a hollow force incapable of sustaining the missions it is assigned."

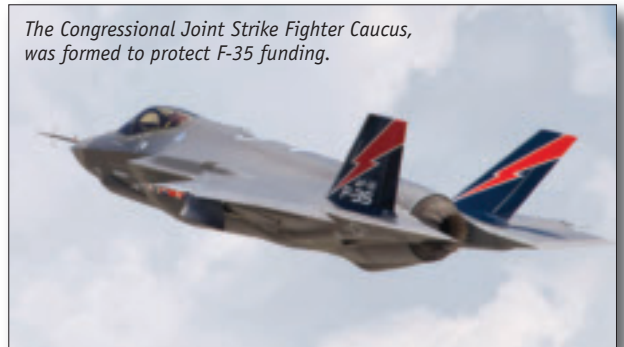
During the months that the supercommittee deliberated, Panetta consistently urged lawmakers not to reduce national security spending beyond the more than \$450 billion already approved by Congress in August.

Rep. Howard P. 'Buck' McKeon (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, wants to overturn

the automatic cuts. "I will not be the armed services chairman who presides over crippling our military," he says. For McKeon and others with the same view, the greatest obstacle may not be the Obama veto threat but the leaders in both parties in the House and Senate. They control what legislation reaches the floor and have shown little interest in reversing the cuts.

Reps. Kay Granger (R-Texas) and Norm Dicks (D-Wash.) announced the formation of a Congressional Joint Strike Fighter Caucus, with 49 members from both parties. Its purpose: to protect funding for the F-35 stealth fighter. The plane, as the most expensive weapons program in history, is vulnerable to defense cuts. Its Marine Corps version, the F-35B, spent much

The Congressional Joint Strike Fighter Caucus, was formed to protect F-35 funding.



of the fall carrying out shipboard tests aboard the assault ship USS Wasp (LHD 1) and performed well. In November the F-35 was noticeably absent from the Dubai trade show, the world's third-largest trade exposition after Paris and Farnborough, possibly because no Middle East nation except Israel has a stake in the program.

Asked whether legislators might intervene to prevent sequestration, Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), the second ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives, pointed out the obvious. "That's more than a year from now," said Hoyer.

A rare look at NRO

When the National Reconnaissance Office was established in 1961, the fact of its existence was itself top secret. Over the years, it has become a little more public—although not much. Its 68-acre, seven-building headquarters on Lee Road in Chantilly, Virginia, on the outskirts of the nation's capital, opened in 1994 and accommodates 3,000 employees. NRO workers, many of them in uniform, flock to the Thai Basil restaurant in Chantilly for lunch. They do not, however—at least not over lunch—discuss the NRO's job, which is the design, acquisition, and operation of U.S. reconnaissance satellites. "That stuff is still pretty hush-hush," says NRO Director Bruce Carlson, who gave reporters a rare update on agency operations to mark NRO's 50th anniversary. (See "Vigilance from above: The NRO at 50," November, page 20.)

In a rare public appearance before reporters, Carlson said his agency has emerged from years of schedule and cost problems with its satellite programs. He noted, "as recently as a couple of years ago, more than 30% of our programs were in the yellow or red, meaning they weren't performing appropriately." Today, said Carlson, "major system acquisitions are in the green," meaning that satellites and associated equipment are being delivered on schedule and at price.

Carlson, 62, a retired Air Force general who was once responsible for acquisition within the military, told reporters that the nation's satellites, like most of its military aircraft, are aging and that considerable effort is being expended to update and upgrade them. He discussed older satellites being used in new ways.

When asked to geolocate the source of push-to-talk radio transmissions that emanate from insurgents in Afghanistan and elsewhere, Carlson said that at first the NRO could achieve accuracy only "within 3 miles." Militants use push-to-talk radios "extensively in the combat zone" because they are difficult to geolocate, he said.

Moreover, they are perceived, apparently incorrectly, as more secure than cell phones. Carlson said that with updated sensors, satellites can now pinpoint a transmission within a few meters. "That means it's targetable."

The NRO is doing less long-range strategic intelligence and more tactical surveillance, making the agency a direct participant in current battles, said Carlson. In a situation like one last spring in Libya, where a two-person crew bailed out of an F-15E Strike Eagle, "we can, within a matter of seconds, turn an incredible number of our sensors on a specific area." He also cited NRO's "Red Dot program," which literally puts a red dot on the computer screen of a soldier on the ground, warning of the location of an improvised explosive device.

Carlson noted that his agency has launched six satellites in seven months—an unprecedented flurry of space activity, most of which was largely ignored by press and public. He said scientific and technological efforts within the NRO are responsible for 60% of the equipment carried by those satellites. The agency is always looking for new ways to collect and process imagery and to get useful information to decision-makers quickly. "We can do it in a matter of hours," he pointed out.

His first priority today, Carlson said, is to shield the scientific and engineering talent in the NRO from the draconian budget cuts expected to occur



Hexagon was a mainstay of U.S. intelligence collection between 1971 and 1984.

when sequestration kicks in. His second is to maintain baseline programs. With science and technology now following the "historical level" of making up 8% of NRO's total budget, up from a low of 5% a year ago, Carlson recognizes that his agency may be vulnerable to cuts. But he said he will cut operations before he'll slash people or programs.

The NRO boss is "happy" with his budget but "would always like more." He said he has several emerging technologies that he'd like to evaluate but does not have sufficient funds for all. He would like to continue to develop both large and small satellites but concentrate on a 'sweet spot' where satellites weigh between 800 and 1,000 lb.

Sometimes, however, size matters. "We tried, 10 years ago or so...to take the capability that we put in our imaging satellites and make it compact and put it on a smaller lift vehicle," said Carlson. "That process was...a colossal failure."

To mark its 50th anniversary, Carlson's NRO released new details about the KH-9 Hexagon reconnaissance satellite, which was a mainstay of U.S. intelligence collection between 1971 and 1984. Also called 'Big Bird'—60 ft long, 10 ft in diameter, and weighing



NRO Director Bruce Carlson

30,000 lb—it is believed to be the largest intelligence satellite ever launched by the U.S. The declassification of tens of thousands of documents enabled Joseph Prusak, head of the KH-9 design team, to speak about it publicly for the first time. But critics say the NRO—like much of the government—is seriously behind schedule in meeting an Obama administration target to declassify 10% of holdings.

Taking aim at TSA

Two Republican congressmen are reviving a proposal that arises from time to time in Washington—to take the job of airport screening away from federal



Rep. John Mica

employees and turn it over to private contractors. Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.), chair of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, and Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee jointly issued a report in November calling for moving airport screening away from the Transportation Security Administration and to “private contractors under federal supervision.”

This is the arrangement that existed before September 11, 2001. The two lawmakers say that if the shift is made, it will end up saving dollars in the long run, even though there will be a spike in initial costs.

The two legislators wrote, “Almost all Western countries have evolved their airport screening programs to meet current aviation threats through



Rep. Darrell Issa

federal oversight of private contract screeners. The U.S. must also evolve to provide the most effective transportation security system at the most reasonable cost to the taxpayer.”

They were careful to write that, despite the change they propose, today’s uniformed TSA screeners are “hard-working, dedicated personnel.”

John Pistole became TSA director in June 2010 and is best known for expanding his agency’s imaging technology and pat-down procedures. He disagrees with the Mica-Issa proposal. Having federal employees for airport security preserves the TSA “as a federal counterterrorism network that continues to evolve to keep the traveling public safe,” Pistole’s spokesman Greg Soule told *Washington Post* columnist Joe Davidson. Most in Washington would say the TSA is an



TSA Director John Pistole

antiterrorist agency, meaning it is part of a defense against terrorism; the term counterterrorism is usually used to refer to striking back at terrorists where they live.

Pistole acknowledges that it is part of his job to confront flak from Congress. A few days before the Mica-Issa report, Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.)



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told Pistole that she is an “expert” on commercial air travel, and that with her artificial knee, she tries her hardest to avoid what she calls “unbelievably invasive” pat-downs in favor of the advanced imaging technology scanning machines. McCaskill called the work of one particular TSA screening agent “ugly.”

“When you have the traveling public tell you these pat-downs are unacceptable, they are not exaggerating,” said McCaskill.

Many in Washington say TSA does not receive enough credit for the very real security it has provided over the years, and that it does not deserve its status as the agency everyone loves to hate. According to Darrell Jenkins of the American Aviation Institute, passengers frequently carp about TSA when they ought to be complaining about the “ever-increasing tax and regulatory burden on airlines and passengers.” The Mica-Issa proposal to privatize some screening is not expected to progress very far.

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