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Sen. Coburn's cuts: Another whack at defense

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Editor's note: Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) released a plan last week that he said would achieve \$9 trillion in deficit savings over the next decade. We review parts of the proposal.

Sen. Tom Coburn wants the Navy to cut its aircraft carriers from 11 to 10 and reduce Navy Air wings by one as part of his plan to reduce Defense Department spending on buying and operating weapons.

It's not an original idea. The Congressional Budget Office has proposed it and others have talked about it, but the Navy is not happy.

Coburn notes that this single reduction "is not equivalent to an option of permanently decommissioning every single aircraft carrier in the Navy's fleet."

He points out in his 600-page report, "Back in Black," that the Navy already plans to have only 10 aircraft carriers over the next three years. Under current plans, the 50-year-old USS Enterprise, the first nuclear-powered carrier, will be decommissioned next year while the next carrier, the USS Gerald Ford, will not be delivered before 2015.

Is that a problem? Coburn points out that during the Cold War, naval forces were needed to meet the Soviet Union in the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Pacific. But that is not the situation today. He notes that the Libyan operation has worked without a U.S. aircraft carrier, with U.S. planes flying from bases in Italy and Europe. Savings here would amount to \$700 million a year.

Bigger gains could come from Coburn's suggestions for the controversially expensive program to produce the new Joint Strike Fighter, the F-35. First, he proposes a multiyear procurement program for 602 of the planes destined for the Air Force in the next 10 years. That step would lock in a 10 percent savings on this \$70 billion purchase.

He also wants the Navy and Marine Corps to cancel their versions of the F-35 and instead pick up another CBO option and buy F/A-18 Super Hornets. According to the CBO, this would save \$18 billion over the next 10 years.

Coburn wants to reduce the nation's deployed nuclear warheads to the levels specified in the recently ratified New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and reduce the number of warheads in reserve, which is not part of the pact with Russia.

He also wants part of the reductions to be in deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles, going down to 300 from today's 450, and even below the treaty-allowable 420. He also wants to reduce the number of strategic nuclear submarines, from today's 14 to 11.

He still wants to maintain 40 strategic bombers, but to delay purchase of any new bomber until the 2020s. The changes, he said, would save up to \$8 billion a year.

The Army's Medium Extended Air Defense System, once considered a replacement for the Patriot missile system, is another Coburn target. It's a joint project with Germany and Italy, in which the United States pays half the costs. But the Army no longer thinks it meets its requirement, and neither Germany nor Italy has plans to purchase it when developed.

Some Pentagon officials and MEADS supporters in Congress argue that termination fees would be costly. Coburn's suggestion, which mirrors another CBO option, calls for terminating MEADS and investing \$3 billion in upgrading the Patriot system. Those steps would save \$13 billion over 10 years, he said.

More projected savings:

- Using a suggestion from the Simpson-Bowles National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, Coburn proposes reducing the \$40 billion a year for Defense Department purchases of support items — tactical radios, radars, night vision goggles, etc. — to \$30 billion a year starting in 2015 through 2021. The savings, he said, would amount to \$52 billion over 10 years.

- \$5.8 billion if the Army modified its plans for its new Joint Land Attack Cruise Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor System. Coburn's suggestion is to use 60 of the current aerostat systems deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq and an Air Force E-3 Sentry AWACs aircraft for airborne warning and control missions and drop plans to buy the JLENS vehicles.

- Another Simpson-Bowles proposal, picked up by Coburn as supplemented by another CBO option, is to reduce military personnel stationed in Europe and Asia by one-third. It calls for reducing authorized force levels by the same number, therefore not requiring increased U.S. facilities to handle the returnees. The estimated savings would be almost \$70 billion over 10 years.

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