

Active Duty Vs. Guard

Air Force Times

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Lacking cash, the Air Force and Congress gird for a budget showdown. Angered by Air Force plans to slash Air National Guard jobs and planes in their home states, members of Congress are lining up to halt all Guard cuts and shift more of the burden to the active-duty force. The threat of a showdown on Capitol Hill follows weeks of failed negotiations among Guard proponents and the Defense Department over the 2013 budget. Released Feb. 13, it called for cutting 5,100 Guard members, 5 percent of the component, but only 3,900 active duty. Another 900 Reserve airmen also would be cut, as would more than 200 aircraft.

Like the people cuts, most of the planes would be taken from the Guard. The fallout was almost immediate as Guard leaders marshaled forces in Congress, primed to protect jobs and assets in their districts.

“No deal is likely until the Air Force is prepared to make roughly equal manpower cuts to the Guard and the active-duty force as a proportion of each component’s overall end strength,” said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., co-chairman of the National Guard Caucus, in a statement to Air Force Times.

Leahy and his co-chair on the caucus, Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., plan to introduce legislation that will force the Defense Department to protect the Guard and would target the active-duty force to cover the cost of keeping more Guard personnel, a senate aide said. Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., a member of the House Armed Services Committee, also plans to press for legislation to block deactivation of Guard planes and personnel cuts, unless the Air Force provides a detailed analysis showing how each action will save money.

“The preference would be not to cut a single aircraft or a single person, but, if it’s going to happen because the budget forces these decisions in the end, then we need to be smart about things,” said Joe Kasper, Hunter’s deputy chief of staff, in an email to Air Force Times. “On a big picture level, the Air Force sees the Guard and Reserve as a safe place to go for savings, which is somewhat contradictory when the Guard and Reserve are still doing a lot of the heavy lifting overseas.”

“The next critical steps and discussions will happen with Congress,” said David Quam, the director of federal relations with the National Governors Association.

For the past couple of years, the active-duty force has borne the brunt of manpower reductions. Air Force leaders say there’s no fat left on the active-duty side, especially considering those airmen are solely responsible for certain duties, such as basic training and recruiting. Due to cuts in the active-duty force, the Guard and Reserve make up 35 percent of the total force, compared with 25 percent in 1990, Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz said during the Air Force Association’s annual air warfare symposium in February. Air Force leaders have said the Guard would take the hardest hits because they had identified areas to cut within mobility, largely a Guard mission.

“The active component has been cut to the point at which capacity cannot be reduced further without harmful effects to the benefits I just mentioned: readiness, increased capacity and the ability to surge and rotate at a sustainable tempo,” Schwartz said.

But during congressional hearings on the budget, Schwartz and Air Force Secretary Michael Donley have failed to convince Guard supporters that it’s the Guard’s turn to take the hit. Under the budget plan, states like Texas, Arkansas, New York, Michigan and Indiana would lose dozens of planes — C-130s, A-10s and C-27Js — and the people who support them.

That spurred the Council of Governors, a bipartisan group of 10 state leaders, to put together a counterproposal, which the Air Force flatly rejected. Negotiations among Air Force leaders and state leaders, such as the Council of Governors and the National Governors Association, have led to proposals and counterproposals. None of them has survived.

In February, the Council of Governors approached Defense Secretary Leon Panetta with an alternative plan. Crafted by a group of adjutants general, the proposal called for eliminating just 2,000 Guard jobs and reducing the active-duty force by 6,400. But the Air Force said the Council of Governors’ counterproposal did not meet any required criteria for the service, misstates its savings and would harm readiness, according to an April 9 memo obtained by Air Force Times. Air Force spokesman Lt. Col. John Dorrian said top leaders from the active force and the Air National Guard crafted that response.

“The factual conclusion of the evaluation was that the CoG proposal would increase costs and produce adverse impacts to the AF’s risk-balanced force structure and combat power,” according to the evaluation. “The CoG proposal did not meet any of the criteria using either sourcing option.”

The budget's aircraft changes were also criticized in the states that stood to lose the most. Governors from the Gulf states, for example, opposed moving eight C-130s from Texas to Montana. In a March 5 letter to President Obama, the governors opposed the plan because the 136th Airlift Wing in Fort Worth, Texas, is a "perfectly functioning and experienced unit that has supported us well." On April 23, Panetta offered a compromise: The Defense Department would restore 24 C-130s and cut just 2,917 guardsmen, 1,000 fewer than the active-duty side would eliminate. It was shot down a day later by state and congressional leaders, who said that wasn't enough.

Panetta's proposal, sent via letter to members of Congress and governors, would have cost \$400 million for the 24 tactical airlifters and 1,179 related personnel, though it did not specifically state where the money would come from. In addition, Panetta offered to restore 1,004 additional Agile Combat Support positions, at a cost of \$173 million, according to an Air Force white paper released to Congress.

"We recognize the important role that these lift aircraft play in our support to civil authorities and to states — particularly in the event of natural disasters," Panetta wrote in the letters obtained by Air Force Times.

The day the letters were signed, Gen. Philip Breedlove, the Air Force deputy chief of staff, briefed members of Congress and urged support for the proposal, Leahy said. Panetta's recommendation to restore the positions and planes was one of several that the Air Force had given him after recommending against a Council of Governors counterproposal, according to a Defense Department official.

A U.S. official told Air Force Times that the \$400 million needed to pay for the additional C-130s and personnel was not likely to come from cuts to active-duty personnel. Senate leaders, however, were quick to attack Panetta's plan, largely because they believed Panetta was simply offering to keep older C-130s that will have to be decommissioned soon anyway, and not the newer C-130Js. The offer to cut fewer Guard members also could be a one-year fix that will come up again next year, Leahy said in a statement. And any deal must include more cuts to the active-duty component, he said.

"Restoring only 2,200 Air Guard personnel means that the Air Force has still failed to meet the governors in the middle on personnel cuts," Leahy said.

Panetta's letters also only address C-130s, with no mention of other proposals in the budget request, including the transfer of C-130 units to the MC-12 Liberty, cancellation of the C-27J and Global Hawk programs, changes to fighter units and elimination of one active, one Reserve

and three Guard A-10 squadrons. The exclusion of these airframes means the proposal will meet additional trouble, a Senate aide said, and they are sure to be included in the legislation.

The growing rift over the active-duty and Guard betrays aggressive service infighting at a time when senior leadership has been trying to emphasize collaboration. After unveiling the initial 2013 budget plan, Schwartz said “the Air National Guard and the Air Force Reserve worked side by side with all of us in the analysis and the decisions affecting the total force.”

Lt. Gen. Henry “Bud” Wyatt, the director of the Air National Guard, has tried to convince skeptical lawmakers that he has been part of the discussion over the 2013 budget. “As the director of the Air Guard, I am allowed to participate in the decision-making process,” Wyatt said at a March 28 House Appropriations hearing. “And, in fact, not only am I asked of my views, I am encouraged to give my views in the corporate process and, in fact, been very aggressive.”

Schwartz, in his appearances in Congress, however, has stressed that any plan for 2013 must be balanced and “not break the active force.” Already, the active Air Force will soon be the smallest it has ever been, according to a white paper sent to Congress in April. Guard leaders also worry about their shrinking force. Despite his involvement in budget talks, Wyatt said he is concerned that the Air Force’s 2013 budget proposal does not take into account the Guard’s home role, and cutbacks would force the service to lose “the most experienced aviators, the most experienced airmen that we have.”

Much of the Guard support in Congress comes from lawmakers who say the Guard is cheaper than the active-duty component and has stepped up to support recent conflicts abroad.

“Keeping the ‘active duty first’ approach will mean smaller and smaller and smaller forces that are stretched thinner and thinner and cannot respond where and when we need them to,” Graham said in a Senate floor speech in February. “That is not the military America deserves nor the one she has come to rely upon.”