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**The Effect of Sequestration**

**On Military Families**

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“A budget tells us what we can’t afford, but it doesn’t keep us from buying it.” – William Feather. Every single government that has existed since the striking of the first social contract has had one thing in common. From the local municipal city council of Black Diamond, Washington, to the world shaping United States government, they all require cold hard cash to function. In times of plenty these governments are able to flourish and swell, gaining the ability to provide luxurious services to their citizens and amass large quantities of military might. Sadly, times of plenty are nothing but a sweet memory for most of the world today, and the United States is no exception. While our economy will inevitably recover and our budgets be rejuvenated, the nation is currently faced with the solemn task of tightening its belt and storing up for winter.

The United States government has been shaken to its core as it has pulled out its wallet and found it completely empty. Many mistakes were made and countless opportunities were squandered to minimize the potential effects of the budget crisis, which has led us away from the fiscal cliff and into the pit of last resorts in which we now stand. The sequestration has forced cuts to be made from every single non-exempt government program. Services and programs that were once taken for granted are now being pulled out from under everyone involved in the government, but how far do these effects reach? The responsibilities and the commitment of the men and women serving in the United States armed forces have certainly not been cut, and still they are consistently and admirably accepting the charge to do more mission with material support that is shrinking away at a breakneck pace. However, when a service member answers their nation’s call to arms it is a sacrifice made by more than just the man or woman signing the papers. There is a commitment made by each and every member of the family. This commitment may be less than the willingness to lay down their lives for their country, but it is nonetheless unmatched in the civilian world. Military families give up their right to choose where they live, to build a home alongside lifelong friends, and even to have their husband or wife by their side, but they are also the recipient of vast amounts of government resources dedicated to their wellbeing. This presents a juicy target to budget makers who are ravenous for any dollar that can be saved. Years could be spent arguing over just how much special treatment the families of service members are entitled to, but almost all would agree that the government caries notable responsibility to support them. Regardless of where the government’s responsibility does or should interact with what they actually provide, the one certainty is that there will simply not be the resources available that there once were. This paper sets out to answer the question of “*Does the sequester have a notable detrimental effect on the day to day lives of military families?*” When the backdrop and motivations leading up to the sequestration, its implementation, and its already visible effects of it are examined, there is enough evidence for a solid conclusion to be drawn. *The sequester was intended to forcibly push the nation a step closer to a balanced budget. However, the crude and sweeping nature of these cuts has the unacceptable effect of carving directly into the quality of life of military families.*

In 2011, Congress found itself in an all too familiar crisis. Once again the federal deficit was going to break through the debt ceiling that was less than two years old ("H.J.RES.45 CRS Summary"). The United States has carried a national debt since it first earned its independence, and raising the debt ceiling had become a basic routine of Congress. The last raising in 2010 was the 74th time it had been done since March of 1962 (Sahadi). What exactly is the debt ceiling and why is it able simply be raised every time the deficit reaches it? First it is important to understand where the debt comes from. The federal government does not have the capability to spend a single dime until the expenditure is approved by Congress, which is done using an appropriation bill. When the grand total of all of the appropriations made by Congress is greater than the money that government has taken in, it is called a deficit. These deficits are covered by the Department of the Treasury through debt instruments, and this series of small shortfalls compounds year after year and results in the behemoth that we call the national debt. Before the 20th century arrived with its wars and rapid technological advancement, Congress was required to authorize the specific amount for each increase to the deficit. When the United States entered into World War I, this process began to restrict our ability to fully commit. This led Congress to create the debt ceiling, granting them the freedom to take on as much debt as was needed as long as it remained within it. The key aspect of the ceiling that allows it to be constantly raised is that it does not actually have any direct effect on the budget or on spending. Many lawmakers view increasing it to accommodate the debt as a foregone conclusion because it is simply allowing the Treasury to continue spending money that it has already approved (Lowery ). If increasing the debt ceiling has always been a formality, then why is it suddenly causing a crisis? The unique political climate that our nation is currently in has bred a Congress that is no longer content with drowning in an incessantly increasing cesspool of debt. The House of Representatives had switched to Republican control under a multitude of new congressmen elected on the promise to cut spend and prevent tax increases. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party controls the White House and the Senate and is dead set on increasing entitlements and taxes on upper class citizens. This provides both camps of Congress with the opportunity to utilize reducing the National Debt as a platform for their own agendas.

While Congress was briefly united in the decision that the blind and limitless raising of the debt ceiling needed to end, that is where the cooperation ended. Their motivations for that decision quickly revealed themselves to be roadblocks for any sort of practical budgetary agreement. The Democrats demanded that much of the deficit be covered by increasing taxes on the richest portion of the population rather than in the cutting of government programs. Meanwhile, the Republicans would refuse to consider any proposal that included any sort of tax increases. This complete and utter lack of compromise put the nation at risk of going into sovereign default before it was narrowly avoided by the passing of the Budget Control Act of 2011 on 2 August. Rather than providing a balanced operational budget for the government, this act put in place a series of institutions intended to force a solution to be produced. To prevent the government from going into default, it did immediately raise the debt ceiling by $400 billion, with allocations for several other small increases if they are required (Hamilton). However, the caveat for this was that spending would receive required reductions of at least the value of the debt ceiling increase. Specifically, they would need to be $917 billion in cuts over the next ten years, including the first $21 billion being directly applied to the Fiscal Year 2012 budget (Mascaro and Hennessey). Congress recognized that it was currently incapable of coming to an agreement on where the cuts would come from, so the act established the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, colloquially known as the super committee. It was composed of six members from each political party, and they were tasked with crafting a plan to cut at least $1.5 trillion from the budget over the next ten years. The newly created plan would be immune to filibusters and would need to be passed by 23 December 2011 (ASA). Congress would also be required to vote on a balanced budget amendment to the constitution by the end of the year, although it was not required to pass. Having attempted and failed an innumerable amount of times to come to a consensus on where to make cuts, it was decided that additional incentive would be needed to foster willingness to compromise. In the event that Congress was unable to pass a bill enacting the required amount of spending reduction, a dramatic series of automatic and sweeping cuts would be triggered. These would total to be $1.2 billion dollars between 2013 and 2021 and would be split evenly from defense and non-defense programs (CBO). This is what is known as sequestration. The goal of this was to create a metaphorical fiscal doomsday device that would be a worst case scenario for everyone, with the intent of forcing the involved parties to compromise on previously non-negotiable terms rather than suffer the potentially devastating fallout of the sequester. Unfortunately, this plan backfired horrifically as the super committee failed and the sequestration went into effect on 1 March 2013.

Within the context of United States political procedure, budget sequestration is defined as a law that places a hard cap on spending within the scope of entire departments rather than individual programs (Johnson). From a practical standpoint, this means that rather than examining a budget line by line and eliminating the programs that are of the lowest priority, every program will receive an equal amount of cuts across the board. In the case of the current sequester, the price tag is $85.4 billion in spending reduction beginning in fiscal year 2013 and continuing each year through 2021. As per the terms of the Budget Control Act of 2011, this translates to roughly $43 billion in cuts from the Department of Defense. Fortunately not every single program is subject to these automatic reductions. For instance, military pay is a protected program and will not be receiving an equal share of cuts. However, the end result of the sequester will be a 9% reduction in budget for all non-protected defense programs. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this style of budget reduction is the total lack of discretion and thought that goes into administering them. The scarcity of resources in the recent past has driven many programs to maximum efficiency. These evenly distributed cuts will remove the 9% from both the most efficient programs and those that remain bloated and wasteful. This results in the most possible damage to mission capability being done to those who are effectively managing their finances, while those who are not are simply forced to comply with stricter standards of efficiency that should have been enforced already. Any plan that possesses this level of inversion in where cuts are felt the worst will not be successful as a long term solution.

The overarching effect of the sequester is to exact marring damage to a massive number of important programs in the military. In addition to the primary effects of these cuts, many of them have secondary ramifications that can extend far beyond their home program. When viewed as a whole, it becomes apparent that a disproportionately large portion of these effects directly relate to the families of military members. Everything that they use falls firmly into the category on non-mission critical expenditures, opening them up to feel the effects of the budget reduction in nearly every aspect of their lives.

The most precious asset that military families treasure above all else is the time they get to spend with their loved ones. Deployments are a necessary aspect in the lives of military families, but there are few things that hurt quality of life more than unexpected or extended time overseas and away from home. Operations in Afghanistan will not be cut because accounts relating to war operations are protected. However, immunity in that program means that the money that would have been saved by cutting it will need to be taken from elsewhere. This includes the programs that recruit, train, and prepare those that would be replacing them overseas (NMMA). This disruption in the pipeline would prevent the replacements scheduled to deploy in late 2014 to be delayed in there training. The only options are to extend the tours of those already overseas, or to deploy replacements that are not yet ready. Given this choice, the military will choose to keep the deployed service members away from home longer. Over 80% of units would be affected by these training delays, making this a widespread loss for thousands of families (Cox).

Educational benefits present a unique challenge for those in charge of trimming the funding for them. From a purely utilitarian standpoint, military funding for private education costs a very large amount of money, and seemingly gives back fairly little in terms of mission effectiveness. Shoring up budget shortfalls by eliminating educational development programs is a crucial error for a myriad of reasons. For instance, educational opportunity is often listed as the top reason for joining the military (Howell). Institutions such as the GI Bill open doors for military members and their families that may not have been options before. Diminishing those opportunities is not only terrible treatment of the service members, but will also have a huge negative effect on retention. When a family loses the chance to earn a college education for a dependent, the incentive to remain on active duty is significantly lowered. The loss of these opportunities will additionally make recruiting far more difficult, potentially causing a manpower shortage in an already critical time. One of the first major program cuts announced after the sequester went into effect was Tuition Assistance. After enormous uproar from military members, veterans, and the whole nation, it was mandated by Congress that it be restored (Terkel). While this is a huge win for many, it will not result in all gain. The congressional order does not mean that Tuition Assistance will be restored in its entirety, but rather that it can only be reduced by the 9% mandated by the sequester. This also implies that the money required to fund Tuition Assistance will need to be gleaned from other programs. This will almost certainly result in additional cuts to the other educational programs that benefit military families.

The dark horse of the sequester (or the dark *sequestrian*, if you will) that will cause the most damage to quality of life is the mandatory civilian furloughs. Civilian employees of the Department of Defense will be given 14, a number recently reduced from 22, unpaid furlough days before fiscal year 2013 ends on 30 September. These furloughs will be able to save around $2.5 billion, but the effects of them will be far reaching and unpredictable (Shane). The loss of those days could potentially cause significant financial hardship for those employees, especially if the furloughs continue into the next year. A substantial portion of the workforce will also be removed from every task that defense civilians fulfill while they are being furloughed. This will inevitably result in drastic depreciation in the quality of every service provided by civilian employees involved with military operations.

The health care system is often touted as one of the greatest benefits of being a member of a military family. For this reason the cuts to the health care system will hit very close to home. It is not a protected program so it will be receiving the same budget reduction as the rest of the military, which works out to be roughly $3 billion. When questioned about the effects of these cuts, Dr. Jonathan Woodson, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs said *“To the greatest extent possible, we will sustain our access to our military hospitals and clinics for our service members, their families, retirees and their families, but sustaining patient care functions during sequestration comes at a cost”* (Mashall). That cost happens to be the upkeep of the facilities and assets that make health care possible. This will allow for continued care for military members and their families in the near future, but it is an unsustainable strategy that will cause increasingly dramatic and long lasting damage to the health care system the longer that the sequester continues. Additionally 40% of military medical center employees are civilians who will be included in the mandatory furloughs. This will decrease access to the medical facilities by causing wait times to skyrocket and potentially eliminating referrals for elective care. Should the sequester continue on, it may even result in delayed payment of civilian doctors who care for TRICARE patients. These damages will cut deep and their residual effects will likely be around for a very long time.

Across the board cuts will likely have tangible negative effects on every community support service that a base has to offer. Many programs that are essential for families dealing with the unique challenges of military life, such as survivor outreach, financial advice, legal counsel, and family support centers will suffer budget reduction. The addition of civilian furloughs will additionally decrease quality of service and increase wait times across the board. These programs are core components of how the military needs to treat the families of its service members, and the double effect of losing part of their budget and weathering the civilian furloughs results in them receiving more than their fair share of operational cutbacks.

Another key benefit that is unique to military families is the right to shop in the base commissary. The military often requires its members to live in areas with extremely high cost of living. Many of these families would be unable to support themselves without the incredible benefit of highly affordable groceries that the commissary provides, which often saves customers upwards of 30% on their bill. The commissary is not an exempt program so it will suffer the budget cuts along with everything else. In addition, it is operated almost exclusively by civilian employees. The loss of funds and staffing hours has forced the commissary program to mandate a “sequestration day” once per week, closing it on a day when it would normally operate. This will be Mondays by default and Tuesdays for those that already are not open on Mondays (Jowers). This is a cut to an essential service that will be felt every single week by thousands of families living on or near military installations.

The resonating effects of sequestration will be felt by every aspect of the military for years after it is resolved. The longer that is continues to greater the damage will be. Enormous budget cuts are a necessity during this season of negative growth, but they need to be performed with a highly skilled scalpel and not with a band saw slicing an even 9% off the top of everything. Despite the attempt at fairness in the cuts, the sequester results in much of the greatest damage being done to the programs that are most crucial to the wellbeing of the families of our military members. The fact that there is a far higher than average proportion of civilian workers in these essential services causes them to be hit nearly as hard by the civilian furloughs as by the budget reduction. This country has the responsibility to treat the men and women of the armed forces with respect and honor at all times, and that includes their families. We should not be the nation that compensates for its inability to make tough decisions by taking more from the men and women who already sacrifice so much.

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