

Action in Congress

By Megan Scully

As he prepares to take over the helm of a Pentagon facing the threat of deep budget cuts, Ashton B. Carter brings with him a proven track record on Capitol Hill.

The Pentagon veteran walked onto the job as the department's chief weapons buyer in late April 2009 just weeks after then-Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates announced plans to gut many of the military's biggest and most expensive acquisition programs.

Before Carter had time to get acclimated to life as the Defense Department's No. 3 civilian, he had his first big assignment: Serve as Gates' lieutenant in selling cuts to Congress.

Lawmakers are reflexively resistant to eliminating weapons programs, particularly ones that bring jobs and money to their states and districts. But Carter and Gates succeeded, ultimately pushing through the vast majority of cuts in Gates' budget proposals, including ending production of the F-22 Raptor stealth fighter jet, terminating the second engine for the F-35 strike fighter, and killing the most expensive and ambitious Army modernization program in history.

Perhaps even more surprisingly, they managed to keep—and even strengthen—ties in Congress, where Carter remains highly regarded even among GOP lawmakers who have sharp differences with the Obama Administration on national security matters.

It was fitting, then, that President Obama alluded to Carter's work as acquisition chief at the outset of his Administration when he announced in early December that the popular technocrat was his pick to serve as the next Defense Secretary. Carter's intimate knowledge of the military will be particularly critical as he takes over a department facing another round of deep budget cuts.

"He's a reformer who's never been afraid to cancel old or inefficient weapons programs," Obama said. "He knows the Department of Defense inside and out—all of which means that on Day One, he's going to hit the ground running."

In the absence of a better budget deal for the department, the Pentagon's accounts will get hit by a round of across-the-board cuts in January 2016 that could force officials to slash \$35 billion

or more from the upcoming Fiscal 2016 request.

Carter, Obama said, will be involved in the Administration's efforts to negotiate a new budget agreement, a role that will require him to attempt to lessen the blow to his department while also preparing for the worst-case scenario.

Either way, weapons programs will be scrutinized and more could be on the chopping block, and there is perhaps no one in Washington better suited to the chore than Carter. His experience—he's worked for 11 Defense Secretaries—combined with his popularity on Capitol

closely with him on a number of issues, including defense acquisition reform," McCain said.

In his first weeks on the job, Carter will be tasked with selling the 2016 request that was more or less finalized before he was even nominated to the post.

That request is expected to blow past the budget caps and, as such, will not provide much of a look into Carter's own priorities or the priorities of a more fiscally constrained department.

If the caps stay in place next January, either Congress must make the cuts within the spending bill itself or allow



DOD photo by Erin A. Kfir-Cuomo

Carter (r) with Marine Corps Maj. Gen. John Toolan Jr. in Afghanistan in 2012.

Hill position him for the difficult job.

Indeed, his support among Republicans bodes well for his tenure as Secretary.

"Ashton Carter is a highly competent, experienced, hard-working, and committed public servant," Senate Armed Services Chairman John McCain said in a December statement.

That amounts to a ringing endorsement from the new chairman, who routinely battles with Administration officials over national security policies and decisions.

And in a nod to the challenges ahead, the Arizona Republican even harkened back to Carter's days as acquisition chief, pointing to an affinity between the two for changing the way the department buys its weapons.

"Throughout Dr. Carter's previous tenure at the Pentagon, I have worked

sequestration to go into effect, slashing most defense accounts regardless of priority.

But even as he is testifying on the 2016 request, Carter will begin directing work on the Fiscal 2017 budget, which the services have already started to draft.

The size and scope of that spending proposal—and the difficult decisions made within it—will depend mightily on the budget negotiations and the amount of relief the Pentagon gets from the stringent caps.

That proposal—and the Fiscal 2018 request that the Administration will complete on its way out the door—will bear Carter's mark and perhaps be his legacy as Defense Secretary. ★

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