

Paul Ryan Spending Cuts Face Backlash From Moderate Republicans

By ANDREW TAYLOR: 08/12/13

WASHINGTON -- Midway between the 2012 and 2014 election campaigns, moderate Republican conservatives are beginning to foment a revolt of their own – a backlash to anti-spending tea party shrillness as budget cuts begin to significantly shrink defense and domestic programs.

Tea party forces may have dominated the House GOP's approach to the budget so far, but pragmatists in the party have served notice they won't stand idly by for indiscriminate spending cuts to politically popular community development grants, education programs and even Amtrak.

Voting in the spring for the tea party budget developed by Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., who was Mitt Romney's vice presidential running mate last year, was one thing. But as long as a Democrat occupies the White House, Ryan's budget is little more than a nonbinding wish list – cutting Medicaid, Medicare and food stamps and slashing budgets for domestic agencies funded annually through appropriations bills.

Many tenured Republicans, particularly members of the House Appropriations Committee, have viewed Ryan's sweeping cuts as unworkable all along. When more than \$4 billion in entirely new cuts came to the House floor in the form of an actual bill for funding transportation and housing programs, House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, confronted shaky support from less ardently conservative Republicans and decided to pull the \$44 billion package on July 31.

That sparked a frustrated outburst from the committee chairman, Rep. Harold Rogers, R-Ky. He called for abandoning the Ryan budget and starting bipartisan negotiations that would provide appropriators with "a realistic spending level to fund the government in a responsible – and attainable – way."

"Attainable" is code for something that can pass the Senate and get signed by President Barack Obama. That's rarely a recipe for tea party fun.

The House has passed just four of 12 appropriations bills that are all supposed to be on the president's desk by Sept. 30. The Senate hasn't passed any, though it also tried and failed last week to advance its version of a transportation-housing bill.

The four House-passed bills largely embrace Obama's funding levels for homeland security, the Pentagon and veterans' programs. The House has yet to pass one with significant spending cuts in the mold of the Ryan budget.

"When it came time for the general (Republican) conference to affirm the Ryan budget in the form of 12 appropriations bills, the conference balked," said Rep. Jack Kingston, R-Ga. "We need to regroup and say, 'OK, was your vote for the Ryan budget a serious vote or was that just some political fluke that you don't intend to follow up on?'"

On the night before the transportation bill was pulled, the House restored, with little debate and a voice vote, some money for Community Development Block Grants that had been cut in half to \$1.6 billion, the lowest level since the program began in 1975.

Mayors love the flexibility of block grants. They can be used for almost anything, from sewer projects and revitalizing slumping downtown business districts to paying for homeless shelters and community health centers. Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va. stepped in with an amendment to add \$350 million back.

"This program has provided much-needed help for our senior citizens, for road repairs and our homeless shelters," she said. "Our local governments need this funding."

Voices of GOP pragmatists such as Rogers and Capito had been drowned out largely since early in the year when Boehner scheduled a succession of votes on bills advancing Democrats' priorities and raising tea partyers' hackles – a \$600 billion-plus tax increase on the wealthy, a Superstorm Sandy relief bill and a liberalized renewal of the Violence Against Women Act.

Each of those bills passed the House in contradiction of a practice instituted by former GOP Speaker Dennis Hastert to only bring up bills that are supported by a majority of Republicans. Since then, Boehner has walked lightly and catered to the party's conservative wing when scheduling legislation.

The most recent squabble is a prelude of what's to come in the fall. When Congress returns in September, it has only nine working days to figure out at what level to temporarily fund federal agencies beyond Sept. 30.

The alternative is a government shutdown that only the most strident tea partyers want to use as a bargaining chip to "defund" Obama's health care overhaul about to go into top gear. GOP leaders like Boehner oppose that idea but have been unwilling to publicly condemn the effort.

In the Senate, the GOP's pragmatic wing includes John McCain of Arizona, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, Bob Corker of Tennessee and Johnny Isakson of Georgia. They've been meeting frequently with White House staff chief Denis McDonough and other top Obama aides seeking ways to replace deep, nondiscretionary automatic cuts known as sequestration with gentler, more targeted cuts.

Graham and McCain are chiefly motivated by a desire to restore Pentagon cuts they say will cripple the military. Other Senate Republicans like Susan Collins of Maine are going to bat for domestic programs.

Of course, Congress could simply keep the government on autopilot at current funding levels, continuing the automatic spending cuts that kicked in last March. One veteran Congress-watcher says passing it in the 435-member House might again require violating Hastert's practice.

"What Boehner has done successfully in the past, is you have to write it to levels that actually get support in the Senate and get some Democrats in the House," said former Rep. Steve LaTourette, R-Ohio.

Some conservatives among the House's 233 Republicans may "then squeal ...," LaTourette said, "but if they're not going to supply the votes to get to 218 in a way that makes everybody in the (GOP) conference comfortable, then that's the strategy that's left to them. And I think that's probably where we're headed."
