

Afghanistan war tax met with skepticism on Capitol Hill

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Lawmakers from both parties reacted with skepticism Tuesday to the idea of a war surtax to pay for the Afghanistan troop surge, a sign that the White House may have to look elsewhere to fund the effort.

Senate Democrats discussed the idea of a tax at their lunch on Tuesday, a day when most Democrats and Republicans in the House and Senate largely dismissed the idea proposed to fund the 30,000 extra troops President Barack Obama is expected to send to Afghanistan.

Only a handful of senior Democrats sounded open-minded, saying they first wanted to hear Obama's rationale.

Most senators and representatives pointed to the recession, saying that a tax increase would be poorly timed because it could prolong the economic drought.

"It's not a good idea to raise taxes in the middle of an economic downturn," said Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D-N.D.). "I do think it needs to be paid for over some budget period. But I don't like the idea of raising taxes now, at a time of economic weakness. That doesn't make sense to me."

Obama is expected to announce his decision in a prime-time address Tuesday night, delivered from the West Point military academy. While the troop surge is largely supported on Capitol Hill, the president has faced severe criticism over how it's funded.

In the House, Budget Committee chairman John Spratt on Tuesday (D-S.C.) said he would not support a tax because of the recession. Spratt said a measure introduced by Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey (D-Wis.) would do so.

"We don't want to raise taxes, especially a surcharge on income taxes in the middle of a bad recession," Spratt said on ABC News' Topline webcast.

Senior Republicans were also united in opposition to the idea. GOP Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.), GOP Whip Jon Kyl (Ariz.) and Armed Services Committee ranking Republican John McCain (Ariz.) all rejected the possibility of a tax, suggesting instead using unspent stimulus money. McConnell also conceded that the GOP allowed the Iraq war to progress while unfunded, but said Democrats went along with the idea.

McConnell also cited the country's 10 percent unemployment rate in arguing that the stimulus program has failed and should be used to pay for the Afghanistan troop surge.

“Ideally it would be better to pay for the war than not. In previous years, both sides agreed not to,” he said. “Given the mounting debt we have, a good place to look would be unexpended stimulus funds. We know the stimulus failed.”

McCain called for funding the effort through a freeze on discretionary spending — specifically, holding 2009 appropriations at 2008 levels, which he said would generate \$60 billion.

“I would look forward eagerly to going through the appropriations and finding those items which are far, far less important than funding our efforts in Afghanistan,” he said. “There’s thousands of ‘Bridges to Nowhere’ in the appropriations process.”

Some Senate Democrats bristled at the Republican opposition to a tax, noting that the GOP passed budgets for five years that allowed the Iraq war to continue funded through supplemental measures and not the federal budget. Democratic Policy Committee Chairman Byron Dorgan (N.D.) called that “shameful.”

“All these years we sent young men and women to war and don’t have the courage to pay for it,” Dorgan said. “We need to find a way to pay for it whether it is expenditure cuts of revenue raisers. We can’t continue this.”

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-Mass.), when asked about funding for Iraq and Afghanistan through emergency supplementals, took a shot at his 2004 presidential opponent by noting that the Bush administration pursued the war without off-setting funding.

“You have to talk to George Bush about that one,” Kerry said.

Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) both sidestepped the question of a tax on Tuesday, saying they want to hear the president’s speech before announcing their positions.

“I have to look at the proposal. We all agree it is a big question we have to address,” Baucus said. “We need to spend some time discussing that. There may be a lot of ideas.”

Other Democrats also said they want to see details.

“I can’t tell right now if it’s a serious proposal, or just one that’s been thrown out,” said Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.). “It’s too early to judge whether it’s serious.”

Democratic Sen. Evan Bayh (Ind.), an Armed Services Committee member, announced his opposition to a tax on “Fox News Sunday,” arguing that the timing of a tax would be poor. Bayh also argued against raising the debt ceiling until the troop surge is funded.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, not at this point,” Bayh said. “We’ve got to look at cutting spending in other parts of the budget before we even talk about raising taxes. ... And if ultimately you’re going to have to start talking about raising taxes, you shouldn’t do it until the economy is robust and really on some pretty good footing.”

— *Jordan Fabian and Roxana Tiron contributed to this article.*

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