

## ARMED SERVICES

# Buck McKeon

**JURISDICTION:** Defense policies and military procurement

**BIG QUESTION:** How can he and Obama compromise on the Pentagon's proposed five-year plan for savings on military programs?

BY FRANK OLIVERI

**Q**UICK TO A HANDSHAKE, impeccably dressed and quite willing to lean in close with a gentle hand on the arm or shoulder, Buck McKeon is an old-style politician who's rapidly learning a new and important congressional role.

That's why one might have been jarred by the curt and angry tones struck by the usually easygoing Californian after a meeting in early January with Robert M. Gates, at which the Defense secretary outlined \$178 billion in cuts and reallocations the Pentagon wants permission from Congress to carry out over the next five years. Although the defense budget has doubled in the past decade — and while the GOP won control of the House last fall on a campaign of shrinking the size of government in the name of deficit reduction — the brand-new Armed Services Committee chairman made it plain that he's got real problems with proposals for cutting the military while troops still are on the ground. Further, he complained that he'd been blindsided by the Defense secretary's proposal.

"We went in feeling uneasy about the \$100 billion and then we found out it was \$178 billion," McKeon says. "We have been talking a 1 percent increase all along, and now they are talking a cut. So I'm just trying to figure out how you do that during wartime."

Indeed, McKeon will be a central player in a pair of debates — within the Republican



caucus and between House GOP leaders and the Obama administration — about competing versions of national priorities and the relative expense of carrying them out. And there's little doubt but that he'll be a vigorous proponent of the view that ensuring a strong national defense is one of the principal constitutional responsibilities of even the most limited federal government.

Given a choice, McKeon says he'd like to see defense spending increase in this decade. The Defense Department had been planning to spend about \$2.8 trillion in the next five years, so Gates' proposal would amount to shaving those aspirations about 3 percent.

"How are we judging this?" McKeon asked. "Are we basing our defense needs on what the budget will pay for, or on what is happening in the world? If we think we are in a safe world and we can cut back after all the wars, then we should say that."

In McKeon's view, the world has not got-

ten safer. Though he acknowledges the budget pressure facing Washington, he's quick to note that the Pentagon has moved in the past two years to reduce the long-range weapons procurement budgets by about \$300 billion — most notably by terminating the F-22 fighter. But he laments that a proposed two-year delay in a version of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (the one that would allow shortened takeoffs and vertical landings), the lack of a clear plan to make good on the Navy's commitment to a fleet of 313 ships

and the proposed termination of the Marines' Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle would be too much for him to support.

McKeon says he's not willing to play a part in repeating what he views as a dangerous pattern in American military history — that after each of its most costly wars, the nation has cut back defense and left U.S. forces unprepared for the next big conflict.

"I try to make sure we are prepared," McKeon says. "I understand the budget situation and the fiscal mess, but my job is to make people aware of the dangers."

McKeon saw the focus of his congressional career switch markedly to defense only 20 months ago, which is when Republican leaders chose him to take the ranking minority party seat on Armed Services. (The opening was created when President Obama picked the Republican who had the post, John McHugh of New York, to be Army secretary.)



McKeon had to fight for the job, beating out both Roscoe Bartlett of Maryland — who had more seniority on the committee — and Mac Thornberry of Texas. His campaign for the job was helped by his being not only a close ally of John Boehner, who was then the minority leader, but also a solid fundraiser for other Republican congressional candidates over the years. (To take the Armed Services slot, McKeon had to give up the ranking spot he then held on Education and Labor, though he still serves on that committee as well.)

Before he became immersed in politics, McKeon worked in his family's business, a chain of Western wear stores based in Santa Clarita that was founded by his parents in 1962. Though the business closed in 1999, McKeon still has a soft spot for ostrich-skin cowboy boots.

Fears that his oldest daughter would be bused into a neighboring school district prompted his first foray into elected office — and he won a 14-person race for the local school board in 1978. After serving as a city councilman, the first mayor of Santa Clarita and a startup bank chairman, naïveté drove his 1992 bid for a newly created congressional district in suburban Los Angeles. A mayor of a neighboring town called and asked for his support for the seat. Instead, McKeon decided to run himself even though “I didn’t know what a congressman did. I’d only met two.”

He ended up winning a narrow primary

## HOWARD PHILIP McKEON

of California

**House History:** First elected in 1992 to a newly created House seat; won his 10th term representing the 25th District (northern Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties; Inyo and Mono counties) with 62 percent last fall

**Residence:** Santa Clarita

**Born:** September 9, 1938, in Los Angeles

**Religion:** Mormon

**Family:** Wife, Patricia Kunz McKeon; six children

**Education:** Brigham Young U., B.S. 1985

**Military Service:** None

**Career:** Clothing store owner

**Political Highlights:** William S. Hart School Board, 1978-87; Santa Clarita City Council, 1987-92 (mayor, 1987-88)

victory against a 14-year state Assembly veteran and then cruising to a 19-point general election win. He’s been held to less than 60 percent of the vote only once since then.

And throughout his first nine terms — he now represents a vast swath north and east of Los Angeles — McKeon has been an advocate of spending generously on the military, not only for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also for modernizing the military to face other kinds of challenges. He says the Obama administration does not pay enough attention to equipping for potential threats — notably an increasingly muscular China. “Choosing to win in Iraq and Afghanistan should not mean our country must also choose to assume greater risk in the conventional national defense challenges of today and tomorrow,” he said a year ago.

To fight wars against other nations will require more spending, particularly on naval and aerospace power, McKeon has contended.

Missile defense has been a major concern, and McKeon has assailed the Pentagon for revising President George W. Bush’s plans for an antimissile shield in Europe.

But McKeon says he isn’t wearing blinders about defense spending. He says he recognizes the cost-control problems the Pentagon is having. And he believes that part of the problem is heavy-handed regulation. He says he met with industry leaders recently and was told by one contractor that a far more robust staff than usual was necessary just to keep track of the demands being placed on him by about 100 Defense Department oversight officials’ requests.

“I think we are going to do a lot of oversight to try and get a handle on this,” McKeon says. “We have way too many people doing things that are just counterproductive. I’m trying to figure out how we attack this and do it in a meaningful way because the bureaucracy is so entrenched.”

Also of paramount concern to McKeon are prospective transfers of detainees from the U.S. military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, either to the United States or to nations such as Yemen, where al Qaeda-affiliated groups are based and where there might be a risk of the prisoners’ release. He has repeatedly pushed legislation that would block such transfers. “Detainees are trained and even bred to foment dissent against Americans. Do we really want them engaged with our prison population, where they will inevitably generate a following of hatred toward the United States government and the rule of law?” he asked.

McKeon has backed Obama’s buildup of forces in Afghanistan but opposed the president’s decision to set a date — July 2011 — to begin a drawdown. Likewise, McKeon supported the war in Iraq and argued strenuously against Democratic efforts to set a timeline for withdrawal of U.S. troops.

Despite his concerns with the Obama administration, McKeon says he will never try to stifle debate with Democrats in the Armed Services Committee. But at the end of the day, there will be votes to determine a course. With the majority in the House, Republicans are a mortal lock to win most debates in committee and on the floor, setting up a powerful counterweight to the slim majority Democrats hold in the Senate.

“Our citizens have spoken, and they want a defense budget that is sufficient to address the challenges of today and the threats of tomorrow,” McKeon says.