

[By Andrea Seabrook](#)

On Capitol Hill today, lawmakers began duking it out over next year's federal budget. Automatic cuts are already in place that would slash the Defense Department by hundreds of billions of dollars, cuts that many in Washington want to avoid. As NPR's Andrea Seabrook reports, a debate today in the House became a proxy for this year's big fight for the hearts and minds of voters.

ANDREA SEABROOK, BYLINE: Here are some facts. If lawmakers do nothing before January 2nd of next year, automatic cuts worth about \$100 billion will lop off huge chunks of the Pentagon's budget and force down spending on other government programs. Almost no one thinks the cuts should be allowed to take effect - not the president, not the Republican speaker of the House, not the Democratic leader. How to replace the cuts, that's where the fighting begins.

Today's bill written by Republican budget guru Paul Ryan would reverse those military cuts, instead slashing the budgets for food stamps, free and reduced school lunches, Meals on Wheels and other social welfare programs. Florida Republican Allen West called it a matter of priorities.

REPRESENTATIVE ALLEN WEST: Do we want to have more people dependent upon entitlements coming from the federal government or do we really want to make sure we are staying with one of our premier responsibilities, and that is to provide for the common defense?

SEABROOK: The bill would also save money by requiring federal workers, including Congress, to pay more into their pension programs and by holding down spending on Medicaid, health care for the poor. Republican budget chairman Paul Ryan.

REPRESENTATIVE PAUL RYAN: Let's go back to the American idea of an opportunity society with a safety net that doesn't keep people in poverty, but gets people out of poverty onto lives of self-sufficiency.

SEABROOK: Now, here's how the Democrats described the bill.

REPRESENTATIVE MARCY KAPTUR: Today, we are debating nothing more than the latest political talking points for the Republican Party.

SEABROOK: Ohio Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur said that with a veto threat from the White House and a Democratically-controlled Senate, this bill is a work of fiction. It's not actually going anywhere.

KAPTUR: So instead of focusing on economic growth and job creation, the Republicans decided to protect their rich friends and flash the programs that the most needy in our country depend upon.

SEABROOK: Throughout today's debate, both sides returned to the same issues. Democrats called Republicans miserly and cold-hearted. Republicans called Democrats wasteful and pandering. It was as if a presidential campaign parade was marching across the House floor. But here's a reality check. Those drastic military cuts all those lawmakers are desperately trying to avoid, they themselves are the ones who put them into law.

They did it last summer after months of fighting over deficits and spending priorities. The cuts, or budget sequestration, as it's called, were supposed to be drastic and scary in hopes of goading the super committee, remember the supercommittee, into finding other bipartisan cuts. But the supercommittee failed and, says Vermont Democrat Peter Welch, all budget debates will fail until both parties change their rhetoric.

REPRESENTATIVE PETER WELCH: What we face is a practical problem, not an ideological battle. And in the House, every issue becomes an ideological issue that is fought to the death rather than a practical problem where we look for progress.

SEABROOK: It's a budget, says Welch, not theology. Today's debate was almost a meta-fight,

Congress trying to undo the knots it tied last summer. The result, in this election year, is likely to be an even more snarled tangle. Andrea Seabrook, NPR News, the Capitol.