

# Democrats taking aim at war budget request

## Lawmakers pledge no more rubber-stamping

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WASHINGTON -- Seeking to exert greater authority over the nation's war chest, Democrats plan to slash billions of dollars from the Pentagon's emergency budget request for combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, contending some of what the military wants -- including next-generation fighter jets and a surplus of advanced-technology tanks -- won't help fight insurgents and amount to misuse of wartime expenditures, congressional officials said.

Congress is now reviewing the Pentagon's request for nearly \$100 billion to sustain military operations in the two battle zones for the remainder of the year. But the package includes money for two new F-35 jet fighters, hundreds more new tanks and armored vehicles than troops need on the front lines, and other specialized items the military says will help rebuild a force damaged by four years of war.

However, newly-empowered Democrats on military affairs committees say they've thrown away the rubber stamp Republicans used for President Bush's war budgets. They have concluded that the Pentagon has padded its emergency requests with expensive equipment not directly related to the fighting in the rugged Afghan countryside or the guerrilla-style combat US troops face in Iraq.

Democratic lawmakers say the Pentagon should have to pay for what they want out of the regular defense budget, where the requests have to compete with other priorities.

"The days of the rubber stamp are over," said Representative Neil Abercrombie, a Hawaii Democrat and the new chairman of the House Armed Services subcommittee overseeing air and land forces. The war budget, he said, "has become a big grab bag. It causes all of the services to simply lose all discipline. "

Abercrombie is among several members of the armed services panel whom Representative John P. Murtha of Pennsylvania -- the chairman of the powerful defense appropriations subcommittee and an outspoken critic of the Iraq war -- tapped to scrub the Pentagon's requests. Murtha's panel is set to begin deliberations over the war budget as early as next week, according to congressional officials.

Some committee staffers have already drafted a list of 40 proposed cuts amounting to nearly \$8 billion, according to aides. About half of the proposed savings would be reallocated to more pressing war-related expenses, such as protective combat gear, they said.

Other leading Democrats responsible for military oversight, including Representative Ike Skelton of Missouri, the chairman of the Armed Services panel, and Representative David Obey of Wisconsin, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, have joined Abercrombie and Murtha. Among their targets: some of the \$14 billion the Pentagon has requested for new armored vehicles, including 58 M-1 Abrams tanks, 168 Bradley Fighting Vehicles, 111 Stryker light armored vehicles, 121 M113 armored personnel carriers, and 22 M88 recovery vehicles.

Despite gaining power through their opposition to the widely unpopular war, Democrats have been unwilling to use their control over spending to financially starve the war or dictate how the military operation should be paid for, fearing that Republicans would portray them as depriving the troops. Shifting items from the "emergency" war budget to the regular military budget, aides said, would send a clear message that the Pentagon can no longer use money for the war to fulfill its wish lists.

The fiscal 2007 war supplemental budget, delivered to Congress in early February, would pay for combat operations through Sept. 30. It is in addition to the \$70 billion Congress has already provided for 2007 -- the largest single-year war expense since 2001, when the US went to war in Afghanistan.

The spiraling war budget has worried fiscal conservatives in Congress that the Pentagon has been using lawmakers' oft-stated desire to support the troops to order up new equipment unrelated to the war. They say the Pentagon created its own loophole last fall when it expanded its definition of war-related costs to include anything the military can use in the wider war on terrorism .

Military officials have urged Congress to quickly approve the war request. The Army's top supply officials told the Globe that its arsenal has been battered by insurgents, desert conditions, and near-constant use since 2001; repairing or replacing it is what the service refers to as "reset" costs.

"Reset handles war-damaged equipment and the war stress on equipment we presently have," said Major General Vincent E. Boles, the Army's deputy logistics chief. "This is a complex, fluid, and expensive operation," Boles added, noting that the service's top priority is "sustained, predictable funding and [the] continued commitment of the Congress."

Critics like Abercrombie maintain that there's a difference between legitimate military expenditures and emergency expenses.

"If these were all replacements for vehicles damaged or worn out in combat, putting them in an emergency spending bill would be absolutely justified," Abercrombie said last week. "There's no doubt the Army needs the equipment, and the administration and Congress will have to make a multibillion-dollar commitment for rebuilding the force, but this request goes far beyond replacing combat losses."