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## A New Call to Arms: Military Health Care

By [TIM WEINER](#)

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The battle over the Pentagon's billions has traditionally been fought between two forces - those who want more new planes and ships and tanks, and those who want more money for troops. Now there is a third: military health care.

The cost of the main military health care plan, Tricare, has doubled since 2001 and will soon reach \$50 billion a year, more than a tenth of the Pentagon's budget. At least 75 percent of the benefits will go to veterans and retirees.

Over the next decade, a new plan for military retirees, Tricare for Life, will cost at least \$100 billion, according to confidential budget documents, rivaling the costs of the biggest weapons systems the Pentagon is building. The surge in military spending since the 9/11 attacks is slowing, and Pentagon officials say they may be forced to choose between the costs of new weapons and old soldiers. The Pentagon, said William Winkenwerder Jr., the assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, faces "a growing, serious, long-term problem."

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Pentagon supporters say the military should not be pressed to choose. "I don't want to see money taken out of health care in order to buy weapons," Senator John W. Warner, a Virginia Republican and chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said in an interview. "I want to maintain that health care. We'll just have to ask the president to allocate more money."

Like corporate America, squeezed by the growing costs of health plans and pensions for graying workers, and like the rest of the American government, cringing at the coming Social Security and Medicare bills for aging baby boomers, the military is recoiling at the costs of keeping promises to its people.

Tricare for Life is one of a long list of assurances, like prescription drug benefits for the elderly, that Washington is making to American citizens at a rate of more than \$1 trillion a month. The government's unpaid-for promises grew by more than \$13 trillion last year, a sum larger than the nation's 2004 economic output, and they now surpass \$43 trillion, said David A. Walker, comptroller general of the United States.

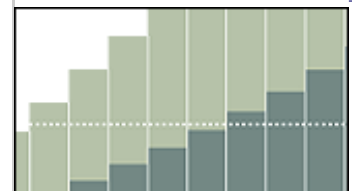
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Last year "was arguably the worst year in our fiscal history," said Mr. Walker, who runs the Government Accountability Office, the budget watchdog of Congress. "It seems clear that the nation's current fiscal path is unsustainable."

Washington, instead of making painful choices, is paving that path with borrowed money and hundreds of billions of dollars of deficit spending.

Tricare, the overall military health plan, has nearly nine million beneficiaries. Its only cost to participants is an annual fee, no higher than \$460 a year, covering all veterans and their families. Tricare for Life, which supplements Medicare, is free. It covers military retirees over 65, their spouses and, in some cases, their former spouses, for as long as any of them live.

The number of military retirees is rising very slowly, toward 1.8 million by decade's end, because many veterans of World War II and Korea are dying. But Tricare for Life payments by the Pentagon will more than double, to \$13 billion a year in 2015, from \$6 billion last year. The money comes directly out of the Pentagon's budget for active-duty soldiers.

Tricare for Life is the biggest part of a package of benefits for military retirees and their families that has been passed by Congress since 2000 and that will cost \$150 billion from now until 2015.

"It's costing mightily and it's in competition with some of the weapons systems," Senator Warner said.

But he said that having a first-class health plan for retirees was a crucial selling point for recruiting and retaining soldiers. "There's no sense in buying modern weapons," he said, "unless you've got healthy, intelligent people who can operate them and are willing to stay there."

The cost of military health care is now bigger than the Army's budget for buying new weapons, the Navy's budget for new ships and submarines, or the Air Force's budget for new planes. "The benefits we've added over the last six years now exceed the services' entire aircraft and ammunition procurement budgets," said Representative Duncan L. Hunter of California, the Republican chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.

Pentagon officials are warning Congress that something has to give.



Photo: Lt. Gen. George S. Patton Jr. in the Field, 1943

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