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Bush's Defense Budget Under Heavy Scrutiny

by Haider Rizvi

The U.S. Congress is coming under mounting pressure to reject President George W. Bush's request for a budget that would boost spending on the military and its operations in Iraq and Afghanistan while slashing aid to millions of poor at home and abroad.

Since Bush announced his budget plan Monday, calls from major policy think-tanks, aid organizations, anti-war groups, and even a section of the media, have been growing in opposition to the proposal for additional funding for the Pentagon.

Unveiling a \$2.9 trillion budget proposal, Bush requested Congress approve \$484.1 billion for the Department of Defense, an amount that represents more than an 11 percent increase in the current levels of Pentagon spending.

In addition to a \$49 billion increase in the budgetary allocation for the Pentagon, Bush also wanted an additional \$141.7 billion for the ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In contrast to this huge rise in military spending, Bush proposed cuts--over the next five years--of \$66 billion for Medicare, the healthcare plan for the elderly, and \$12 billion for Medicaid, which covers low-income families and individuals. As for development assistance abroad, he sought 30 percent less than the current level of funding, which already stands at less than two tenths of 1 percent of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP).

In the coming weeks, as Congress discusses and eventually votes on the budget proposals, critics say they will press lawmakers to scrutinize Bush's request for additional funding for the military.

During the next few days, the Pentagon is due to brief Congress about what it needs. Observers say the military leadership is likely to justify its demand for additional funding by arguing that the current level of allocation as a percentage of GDP is at a historic low.

While this statement may be accurate, it's also misleading, according to independent military analysts, whose calculations suggest that in real (inflation-adjusted terms) the defense budget request of \$481.4 billion is more than 25 percent above the Cold War average.

"[It is] nearly equal to the high-water mark of the Reagan-era buildup, and this for a military one-third smaller than it was in 1990," says Christopher Hellman, a military analyst at the Washington, DC-based Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, an independent policy think tank.

In his analysis, since September 2001, annual defense spending has grown "dramatically," with \$120 billion increase in real terms. That the Pentagon budget accounts for a smaller percentage of GDP is a result of the U.S. economy growing even faster--44 percent over the same period.

Hellman argues that determining appropriate levels of dense spending should be based on an assessment of the threat to national security, not "some artificial formula," like its percentage of GDP.

"Defense budgets as percent of GDP say nothing about the burden that higher military spending put on the American taxpayer," he said, adding that increases in such spending lead to higher taxes or deficits or cuts in other federal programs of social significance.

"Under such a formula, what happens if the GDP decreases?" he asks. "Would the military then support a parallel reduction in its budget? I think not."

While Hellman fails to explain why the Pentagon's budget continues to grow, other critics point to the enormous influence of defense contractors and Washington lobbyists.

Dissecting the Bush proposal, the New York Times ran an editorial Tuesday urging Congress to pay "particular attention" to the roughly \$140 billion in weapons procurements, research, and development costs that "are products of cold war strategic thinking."

That includes \$4.6 billion slated for the Air Force's F-22 stealth fighters, \$2.6 billion for the Marine Corps' V-22 Osprey, \$3 billion for the Navy's DDG-1000 stealth destroyers, and \$2.5 billion for the Virginia-class attack submarine. It also includes much of the \$15.9 billion for space weapons and missile defense.

"If the new Democratic-controlled Congress is serious about reducing budget deficits and finding the money to pay for acute domestic needs," the paper said, "it will have to pare back the most extravagant elements of this fantasy weapons wish list."

The hard-hitting editorial went on to say, "this nation can afford to pay for all of its legitimate military needs. What it cannot afford are costly job programs disguised as defense and the wasteful weapons projects promoted by an army of well-connected Washington lobbyists."

Additionally, Bush's intention to increase defense spending, has also drawn fire from anti-war groups who are poised to launch a nationwide campaign against the funding for the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

"The most supportive thing that Congress can do is to end the war by de-funding it," said Nancy Lessin of Military Families Speak Out, an organization of people opposed to the war in Iraq who have relatives or loved ones in the military. The group is closely allied with United and Peace for Justice, which has organized a series of nationwide rallies since the invasion of Iraq in March 2003

Anti-war groups said they plan to organize protest activities at Congress members' district offices during Congressional recess period scheduled for the week of February 19.

"Members of Congress cannot simultaneously oppose and fund this war," Lessin added in a statement. "All those who do vote for funds to continue the war in Iraq need to understand that this war will no longer be George Bush's war, it will be theirs. If they fund it, they own it."

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