

US Congress passes \$368 billion for Pentagon war machine

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With only seven minutes of debate and a lopsided vote of 407 to 15, the US House of Representatives Wednesday approved a new Pentagon budget that continues an eight-year escalation of Washington's spending on war.

The military budget, which covers the fiscal year beginning October 1, totals \$368 billion—a level the previous administration had projected would not be reached until 2009. Another \$19.3 billion is to go to pay for new nuclear weapons, an arms program directed by the US Department of Energy.

The Pentagon budget approved by the House includes \$100 billion for pay and personnel, \$133 billion for operations and maintenance, \$75 billion for new weapons systems and \$61 billion for research and development.

None of these vast sums are going to pay for the ongoing US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Bush administration is seeking a separate \$87 billion appropriation for that purpose, on top of the \$79 billion already passed by Congress in April to fund the Iraq war.

The spending approved for new arms is about \$2 billion more than what was appropriated for fiscal 2003. Appropriations for weapons have increased continuously since 1996, the longest period of escalating arms spending since the Second World War. The administration has advocated increasing these expenditures to \$100 billion by 2008.

The big-ticket items in the new arms spending include over \$9 billion for a national missile defense system that the Bush administration is rushing to make operational by late next year, timed to coincide with the presidential election.

A report issued this week by the US General Accounting Office charged that in rushing to deploy the system, the Pentagon is incorporating radar and other technologies that are largely untested, a procedure that is almost certain to result in the projected \$50 billion to be spent over the next five years spiraling far higher.

“Making a decision to begin system integration of a capability before the maturity of all critical technologies have been demonstrated increases the programs cost, schedule and performance risks,” the GAO said.

The bill also funds the construction of 22 F-22 Raptor stealth fighters, a combat plane whose main purpose is to shoot down other planes. Given the overwhelming air superiority of the US

compared to any potential enemy, the need for these planes—which won't be ready for three years—has been questioned by independent military analysts. Such criticism has been brushed aside by lobbyists for Lockheed Martin and Congressional delegations from Texas and Georgia, where the planes are assembled.

Also included in the Pentagon budget is \$11.5 billion for building new ships for the Navy, a 25 percent increase over the previous year. Most of the increase will be used to launch five new attack submarines, joining an existing fleet of 54. A report from the House-Senate conference committee on military spending noted that the cost of the subs had increased by 31 percent in one year.

The budget provides funding for the Terrorism Awareness Program, a controversial and massive electronic surveillance program that was designed to coordinate the Pentagon's collection of financial, medical, travel and credit information for millions of Americans.

Funding for the program, which has been denounced by civil liberties groups as a police-state domestic spying operation, has been continued, but it was removed from supervision of the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. That agency, known as DARPA, was widely criticized both for the surveillance program and for a scheme that came to light earlier this year to set up a futures market on international terrorist attacks, allowing investors to bet on future assassinations, terrorist bombings and other acts of violence.

The Congress also slipped into the budget a last-minute face-saving item aimed at concealing the way America's ruling elite really feels about the troops whom it incessantly demands that rest of the population unconditionally support. The item would end a practice that came to light as growing numbers of maimed and wounded soldiers were sent back from Iraq. After their release from military hospitals in the US, they and their families were shocked to receive bills from the government demanding they pay for the food they were served while hospitalized at the rate of \$8.10 a day. In some cases, the bills added up to several hundreds of dollars.

Even as the House passed the \$368 billion Pentagon bill, hearings continued on the administration's request for another \$87 billion to fund the Iraq and Afghan operations.

Testifying before the Senate Appropriations Committee this week, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld dismissed concerns about these interventions sending the military budget spinning out of control: “Is \$87 billion a great deal of money? Yes. Can our country afford it? The answer is also yes.”

The Bush administration has refused to spell out how it will afford this expenditure. It has ruled out any reduction in the additional \$878 billion in tax cuts it intends to push through for the wealthy this year, leaving only two possibilities: either military expenditures will be met through a further reduction in social spending, or it will simply be added on to a ballooning federal deficit that will go well over a record half a trillion next year. None of the Democrats on the appropriations panel challenged this assessment by Rumsfeld and the proposed funding is expected to easily pass both houses of Congress.

In one revealing exchange during the administration’s Capitol Hill push for Iraq occupation funding, Washington’s proconsul in Iraq, Paul Bremer, was queried on specific budget items in the \$20.3 billion portion of the occupation fund supposedly earmarked for “reconstruction.”

The item was a request for \$400 million for the construction of two new 4,000-bed maximum-security prisons, presumably intended to hold Iraqis suspected of fighting in the resistance to the US military occupation.

Congressman David Obey, the senior Democrat on the House appropriations committee, pointed out that the cost amounted to \$50,000 per bed. “How could it possibly cost us that much to build that kind of prison in Iraq?” he asked. “I mean, you could build a prison in the United States for that amount and have money left over.”

Bremer stumbled through an answer that cited estimates of prison costs in the US a decade ago and a claim that “shortages of cement” in Iraq had driven up costs.

This episode offers only a glimpse of the wholesale fraud and theft that is being prepared in Iraq under the cover of the “reconstruction” effort. Undoubtedly, the costs of prison construction were worked out in conjunction with politically connected contractors in the US who are preparing to make a killing.

That the US is spending well over \$1 billion a day on its military under conditions in which it faces no credible military adversary is scarcely even noted by the media and passed over in silence by the Democratic Party leadership.

US arms spending is roughly the equivalent of the next 19 biggest-spending military powers combined—most of which are formally allied with Washington. It is triple the combined amount spent by Russia and China, the next two largest military powers.

When the additional sums for the Afghanistan and Iraq wars are added to the regular Pentagon budget, the US government is spending well over half a trillion dollars a year on arms. This is roughly the same amount as it appropriates for the entire human resources and social service sectors combined, including Social

Security, Medicare and Medicaid, education, housing, employment, welfare and food aid as well as the government agencies that run them. The vast diversion of social wealth to pay for weapons and war finds direct expression in the mounting health care and education crises, the bankruptcies of state governments and the accelerating deterioration of the US infrastructure.

While the Bush administration has promoted its massive military budgets in the name of the “global war against terrorism,” the bulk of the Pentagon spending has little conceivable connection to preventing terrorist attacks. Rather, it is geared to the building of armed forces capable of carrying out imperialist interventions and intimidating potential economic and geopolitical rivals with overwhelming military force.

The Pentagon has incorporated this offensive strategy in its core doctrines, particularly in the wake of Bush’s announcement in 2002 of a new National Security Strategy based on “preemptive wars” of aggression. As an article published in the latest issue of *Parameters*, the magazine of the US Army War College, noted, while previously the US military engaged in “threat-based” planning, geared to countering and deterring potential attacks from the former Soviet bloc, now, in the “seeming absence of any real threat at all,” it has adopted a “capabilities-based” strategy.

“A ‘threat-based’ force was reactive and defensive in nature: the United States awaited the thrust,” the article states. “In contrast, a ‘capabilities-based’ force carries with it the implication of offensive capabilities if not intent: the US focus is not on any particular threat as it prepares for any and all contingencies by adopting an aggressive, forward-leaning posture.”

This “posture” assures that the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan are only the beginning of a worldwide eruption of US militarism.



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