

Democrats back massive hike in military spending

Tom Carter in Washington DC
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The Bush administration's fiscal year 2008 budget continues the administration's policy of tax cuts for the rich and attacks on social programs for working and poor people, but its centerpiece is a massive increase in the military budget—not only for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also to fund a permanent increase in the size of the Army, Marines and Special Operations forces, and a host of major military procurement programs.

The budget includes \$481.4 billion for the Department of Defense. This would be a 62 percent increase over 2001. When combined with a separate "Global War on Terror" supplemental request for \$93.4 billion for fiscal year 2007 and \$141.7 billion for 2008, the total military spending proposal soars to \$716.5 billion, the highest military outlay in real terms since World War II.

The scale of military spending and the structural changes proposed clearly portend military actions for decades to come far beyond the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They reflect a foreign policy based on the use of military violence for the purpose of achieving US global hegemony.

A February 7 hearing of the House Armed Services Committee, at which Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Peter Pace testified in support of the military spending plan, made abundantly clear that a large majority of Democrats support the administration's military budget and will vote to pass it.

The tone for the hearing was set in the opening remarks of the committee chairman, Rep. Ike Skelton, a Democrat from Missouri. "Now it is time for Congress to play our constitutional role," he said. "As authorizers it is our solemn duty to ensure that this budget is sufficient."

This formulation is an inversion of the committee's actual constitutional responsibility—to act as a check on the executive and the military—and instead turns it into a rubber stamp.

Skelton called for an expansion of the war in Afghanistan and chided the administration for creating a quagmire that weakened the ability of the US military to conduct operations against other enemies around the world.

He declared, "Every day we continue that fight [in Iraq] is another day we increase the strategic risk to the United States, that we may not have the right resources when our military is next called upon to deter or respond to a conflict."

"In general," Skelton continued, "there is much to commend the budget." He praised the plan to build eight new ships and other programs that "ensure that our forces dominate the domains of air and space." Skelton was "gratified to see the president finally agrees with my ten-year quest to bolster the size of our ground forces."

In their testimony, both Gates and Pace implied that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were just the beginning of military campaigns around the globe. Gates referred to the "threats... faced by our nation in the future," while Pace stressed that the "current heavy demand for ground, sea, and air capabilities is not likely to dissipate in the immediate future."

Gates acknowledged that there might be some "sticker shock" from the enormous budget request, but as it transpired, neither side of the political aisle gave him cause for concern. "This is really not that much money that you're asking for," said Democrat Hank Johnson of Georgia.

Pace highlighted the establishment of a unified Africa Command and the proposed increase in the size of Special Operations forces. These are specially trained troops that engage in lethal covert actions. Pace noted that, in addition to Afghanistan and Iraq, these units "deploy to approximately forty other countries around the world."

Pace rattled off a list of "threats and challenges" around the world, including Iran, North Korea, China, Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Venezuela, Cuba, and all of Latin America and Africa—regions that together are home to roughly a third of the world's population.

In the course of the hearing itself, virtually every Democrat who asked a question of Pace or Gates prefaced it with praise of the military and assurances of his or her "support for the troops."

"Let me begin by saying, I truly love the military," gushed

Carol Shea-Porter, a Democrat from New Hampshire.

What passed for Democratic criticism of the military budget was not only meek, but abject. Kristen Gillibrand of New York argued, along the lines of the Iraq Study Group report, that military force alone could not solve the crisis in Iraq and that military operations had to be supplemented with political and economic efforts. “At the outset of the war we were told that Iraqi oil revenues would pay for reconstruction,” she said, and suggested that Iraqi money, instead of US money, be used to pay for reconstruction efforts.

Another theme of Democrats who expressed concerns about the budget was its failure to prepare adequately for a potential confrontation with China. “I am concerned with the nuclear navy that China is building,” said Shea-Porter. Democrat Joe Sestak of Pennsylvania criticized the military’s overall lack of “readiness” to respond to China and North Korea. Kathy Castor, a Democrat from Florida, expressed concerns that the budget could “eat into our readiness to meet other global threats.”

The general attitude of the Democrats to the budget was summed up in an exchange between Rep. Solomon P. Ortiz of Texas and General Pace. After expressing concerns that the budget did not provide sufficient funds for the replacement of equipment for units on the front lines, Ortiz asked, “Does this budget give you everything you need?” Pace replied in the affirmative.

At one point, after praising the new Africa Command as an “enormously important step,” Democrat Mark Udall of Colorado alluded to the massive anti-war sentiment expressed in the November midterm elections. “In a democracy,” he said, “there is a conflict between immediate passions and long-term strategic aims.”

Translated into plain English, this means the will of the people (“immediate passions”) will have absolutely no bearing on the pursuit of the “long-term strategic aims” of the American corporate-financial oligarchy.

Expressed at the hearing was not simply the general militarist and imperialist consensus that dominates both parties, but also the specific interests on behalf of which committee members were speaking. One could go through the list of congressmen and, with remarkable precision, identify Congressman X as the man from Grumman Corporation, Congressman Y as Mr. General Dynamics, and so on.

Committee members from both parties, in making their comments on military strategy, pressing budget needs, etc., were promoting the agendas of the military-industrial contractors who paid their campaign bills. They were hustling for specific weapons systems and potential government contracts that could earn their corporate

sponsors millions if not billions in profits.

“This budget proposal for shipbuilding is pathetic,” declared Gene Taylor, a Democrat from Mississippi. “The legacy of the Bush administration will be a 140-ship fleet,” he said. “The fleet is 60 ships smaller than when Bush took office.”

Taylor over the course of his political career has received more than \$220,000 in defense industry campaign contributions. Some \$45,250 of that came from Northrop Grumman, which operates a major military shipbuilding facility in Pascagoula, Mississippi—in Taylor’s congressional district. This facility is responsible for Tarawa, Spruance and Kidd class destroyers, and is the lead shipbuilder for the new Aegis guided missile cruiser program. Litton Industries, Lockheed Martin and General Dynamics also donated tens of thousands of dollars each to Taylor’s campaigns.

Joe Courtney, a Democrat from Connecticut, criticized a “disturbing decline in the Navy” and cited the increasing size of China’s submarine fleet compared with that of the US. Connecticut, home of the New London Submarine Base, is the world leader in submarine production and the site of production facilities for the US nuclear submarine fleet. The sub builder is the Electric Boat division of General Dynamics.

Democrat Vic Snyder of Arkansas criticized the budget for proposed cuts in defense research. Snyder’s top contributor is the University of Arkansas, which has donated \$56,900 to his campaigns. Since Snyder has been in office, the University of Arkansas has received millions of dollars in defense contracts. In the fiscal year 2005 Department of Defense appropriations bill alone, \$5 million was allocated for defense research at the university. On the whole, Arkansas companies received more than \$140 million for defense projects in that bill.

And what about House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ike Skelton himself? Skelton has received a staggering \$873,000 in defense industry contributions.

A list of his top campaign donors reads like a roster of the most powerful American defense companies. Northrop Grumman has donated \$95,950 to the chairman’s campaigns, Boeing—\$91,000, Engineered Support Systems—\$77,634, Lockheed Martin—\$68,350, General Dynamics—\$55,750, Raytheon—\$44,250, BAE Systems—\$41,428, and General Electric—\$35,500.



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