The fraud of "oversight" by Democrats

Pentagon officials provide few answers at House committee hearing on troops at the border

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The newly organized House Armed Services Committee held its first hearing Tuesday since the Democratic Party took control of the House of Representatives on January 3, to hear testimony from Pentagon officials about the Pentagon's recent deployment of active-duty troops to the US border with Mexico.

The fraudulent character of the claim that the House committee provides "oversight" into the vast, worldwide operations of the Pentagon, the largest military machine on the planet, was demonstrated the day of the hearing. Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan told reporters at the Pentagon that "several thousand" more troops would be deployed to the border, a fact that was not mentioned by the officials who testified before Congress.

Members of the Armed Services Committee, which has jurisdiction over the Pentagon's $700 billion annual budget, asked questions about the cost of the deployment at the border and its impact on other military operations during a three-hour hearing. President Trump first ordered regular troops to the border last November, just before the election, and the Pentagon has renewed their deployment until at least September 30.

Representative Adam Smith, a Democrat from Washington state who supported the invasion of Iraq and has opposed curbs on domestic spying by the National Security Agency, set the tone for the hearing right from the start, criticizing Trump's troop deployment not as an attack on democratic rights, but as a waste of military resources.

Pointing to the decline in the number of people detained crossing the US-Mexico border, he asked the military and civilian officials appearing at the hearing, "Why all of a sudden now is it a crisis and what impact is it having on the military?" This question and many others remained largely unanswered.

John Rood, the Pentagon's undersecretary for policy and a former executive of Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, told the committee there were now 2,300 active-duty troops on the border. Of the original 6,000 troops deployed to the border last fall, 3,600 have returned to their bases. In addition, the number of National Guardsmen deployed currently is just under 2,300, bringing the total number of troops to 4,600.

Officials then said the minimum cost of the deployment was now $237 million, in addition to another $448 million for the deployment of the Guard troops alone until September. The total cost of all the troops on the border in fiscal 2019 was never mentioned, but is likely to be upwards of $1 billion for current troops levels, not counting the "several thousand" more to be added.

One of the witnesses before the committee, Vice Admiral Michael Gilday, the Joint Chiefs of Staff's director of operations, testified that despite the fact that no terrorists have be detected seeking to cross the US-Mexico border, the "threat is real." He offered Republican Rep. Don Bacon a classified briefing later. But he offered no public evidence to support his dubious claims.

A few Republicans then speculated about the possibility that "potential" terrorists in Latin America

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could make their way north, thousands of miles, and cross into the United States from Mexico.

Another phony pretext for the military deployment, the “war on drugs,” was brought up before the committee. Most experts on the subject agree that the vast majority of illegal drugs that come into the United States arrive at legal ports of entry, which will still remain, regardless of any military deployment or border wall.

The Armed Services Committee hearing featured at least seven new Democratic members drawn from the group that the WSWS has identified as “CIA Democrats”—legislators drawn straight from the milieu of intelligence operatives, military commanders and civilian war planners. Two of these CIA Democrats played prominent roles at Tuesday’s hearing.

Virginia Democrat Elaine Luria, a retired naval warship commander, tried to get the witnesses to say that the US Southern Command, which conducts missions to interdict drug trafficking in Central and South America, had been denied troop requests while 5,000 troops were being sent to the US-Mexico border. Vice Admiral Gilday was not able to say how many more personnel the Southern Command needs, but argued that counter-drug missions had to make way for new priorities, like military mobilization against with Russia and China.

Michigan Democrat Elissa Slotkin, a former CIA operative in Baghdad and former Pentagon official, also hammered away at the “readiness” issue. She did not raise the humanitarian or constitutional implications of sending the Army to the border, but rather its diversion from other, more pressing, tasks.

Slotkin criticized the timing of the deployment as damaging to the image of the US military. “I am extremely concerned that we preserve the reality and perception that the US military is apolitical,” she said, adding, “It is hard to feel it wasn’t political given how close it was to the midterms.”

These comments are in keeping with the Democrats’ criticism of Trump’s border deployment. They argue that the deployment is a political stunt rather than a dangerous step toward eroding democratic rights and in violation of the Posse Comitatus law, which bars the military from engaging in police actions within the US.

Despite hours of testimony and questions that failed to shed any real light on the true cost and nature of the border Army, the Pentagon officials were allowed to brag about their “very successful” results, with Gilday saying, “We’re not trying just to have a photo op down there.”

The hearing came at a time when large sections of the federal government have just resumed operations after the longest partial shutdown in history. The main point of contention between Trump and Democratic leaders Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer is funding for a wall along the US southern border.

Trump has openly threatened that if a deal on the border wall is not reached by the new deadline of February 15, he may declare a national emergency and order the military to build the wall in defiance of Congress. This is the context in which Acting Defense Secretary Shanahan made his announcement that more troops were being sent. When asked why more troops were called for, he said, “Several thousand, and I’ll kind of leave it at that.”

The decision to send more troops to the border coincides with the news that another caravan of refugees seeking asylum from Honduras is about to travel through Mexico soon.

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