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Defense Spending Soars to Highest Levels Since World War II

by James Rosen

WASHINGTON - As the Iraq war enters a fifth year, the conflict that President Bush's aides once said would all but pay for itself with oil revenues is fueling the highest level of defense spending since World War II.

Even with past spending adjusted upward for inflation, the \$630 billion provided for the military this year exceeds the highest annual amounts during the Reagan-era defense buildup, the Vietnam War and the Korean War.

When lawmakers approve a nearly \$100 billion emergency spending bill in the next few weeks, Congress will have appropriated \$607 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with about 75 percent going to Iraq, according to a new Congressional Research Service study obtained by McClatchy Newspapers.

Less than three months after assuming control of Congress, Democrats are moving away from their election campaign pledges to restrict or eliminate funding for Iraq.

"Nobody wants to be labeled anti-military for the crime of cutting the budget," said Winslow Wheeler, an analyst at the Center for Defense Information in Washington. "It makes supporting whatever the military services request a political necessity amongst both Democrats and Republicans."

Bush appealed to lawmakers Monday to pass the war supplemental measure without adding troop withdrawal dates.

"They have a responsibility to get this bill to my desk without strings and without delay," Bush said.

Rep. Ike Skelton, D-Mo., chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, responded: "This week's House debate on the supplemental appropriations bill offers an opportunity to change the current course in Iraq by demanding accountability and beginning a phased redeployment of U.S. troops, which is a step that serves the interests of both the United States and Iraq."

No one disagrees that a lot of money is being sucked up in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the relentless violence grinds up tanks, planes and other aging equipment.

Beyond the immediate war costs - accelerated by the 30,000-troop increase Bush has dispatched to Iraq - defense analysts inside and outside the government cite several factors that they say are driving military spending:

- Pentagon funding declined in the 1990s, under the first President Bush and President Clinton, as Americans enjoyed what would prove to be a short-lived "peace dividend" after the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.
- Aging weapons systems fell into disrepair and weren't replaced at what would have been bargain-basement prices by today's standards.
- Military health care and pension costs are soaring as the recruits and officers who formed the volunteer armed forces after the Vietnam War retire and begin to age.
- Pentagon planners are replacing several generations of major weapons systems simultaneously in the Army, Navy and Air Force; the new high-tech tanks, ships and planes are as much as 10 times more expensive, on a per unit basis.
- Congress is likely to approve Bush's request for an increase of 92,000 soldiers and Marines in the country's active-duty forces, the largest growth spurt since the Cold War ended

About 300,000 American troops are deployed outside U.S. borders - roughly half in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the other half in 76 other countries.

Gen. Peter Schoomaker, the Army chief of staff, told the Senate defense appropriations subcommittee last week that winning the war on terror will require still greater resources.

"The country's not mobilized," Schoomaker said. "Less than one-half of 1 percent of the people are participating in this. And I absolutely believe that we've got to get people out of the spectator stands and onto the field. ... I believe that this is a very long, serious fight that's going to continue to get more and more dangerous."

Already, the United States is spending almost as much on its military as the rest of the world spends on combined armed forces.

Some analysts wonder whether the torrent of money is being channeled in the right directions.

"Since we are outspending the rest of the world on big-ticket weapons systems, we really don't need to worry about an enemy who fights us with those sorts of weapons," said Loren Thompson, head of the Lexington Institute outside Washington.

"The place where we seem poorly equipped is in unconventional conflicts," he said. "Maybe instead of spending billions of dollars on high-tech networks to fight wars like Iraq, we might spend a more modest amount of money on teaching our soldiers just to speak the (Arabic) language."

James Carafano, a defense analyst at the Heritage Institute in Washington, said military spending isn't nearly as high when compared to the overall size of the U.S. economy.

Current defense appropriations equal about 4 percent of the gross domestic product, Carafano said. That figure is up from the 3 percent level under Clinton, he added, but still a good bit lower than the 7 { percent share reached during the Cold War.

"When you have a bigger house, you buy more insurance," Carafano said. "When the nation is worth a lot more, we have to spend more to protect it."

History, Thompson said, will determine whether Americans are getting a fair return on their investment in defense.

"We have not had any follow-up attacks to 9/11; that's a pretty powerful success story," he said. "On the other hand, the world's best-equipped military is being fought to a standstill by a handful of zealots in Iraq. That's a powerful story of disappointment and frustration."

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