These people need watching

by Winslow T. Wheeler

Both political parties in Congress are fundamentally anti-military. The was clearly demonstrated on Nov. 8 by an overwhelmingly bipartisan vote of 400 to 15 in the House of Representatives and an unopposed unanimous voice vote in the Senate on a new Department of Defense Appropriations Act to fund peacetime Pentagon programs for the current fiscal year. President Bush joined the anti-defense throng on Nov. 13 when he signed this legislative monstrosity into law.

Anti-military monstrosity? What's wrong with voting for spending in the Department of Defense?

Let me count the ways.

Consider the following, which members of Congress from both parties and the president forgot to include in their press releases ballyhooing the passage of the defense bill:

- Congress cut the Pentagon's military personnel account, the basic payroll for military men and women, by $500 million. It cited rationales such as "excessive growth" in funding for Army personnel (which is strange when the Army is trying to expand and the president and almost everybody in Congress declare themselves in complete support of that expansion). It also cited obscure budgetary pretexts such as "prior year underexecution" (known to many experts to be both arbitrary and phony).

- The reductions continued in the operation and maintenance account; this is the part of the DOD budget that pays for weapons maintenance, training, fuel, food, uniforms and much else that enables a military to operate at the most basic level. Congress cut Navy training and weapons maintenance by $129.7 million and $50 million respectively, and Air Force training was reduced by $400 million.

With the military services struggling to send properly trained and equipped people to Iraq and Afghanistan, these are strange places to cut money. Bigger cuts appear in the Army's operations and maintenance budget. They are based on more of that "unjustified program growth," totaling a whopping $836.3 million. Taken altogether, the reductions in the Pentagon's total operating budget come to $4.944 billion.

A presumably innocuous general provisions part of the bill is home to two gimmicks to exact more reductions, namely:

- Section 8097 mandates that each and every "budget activity, activity group, subactivity group" that spends

defense contracting money shall be reduced proportionally, without regard to value or effectiveness, by a grand total of $506.9 million.

- Despite the uncertainly of future developments in today's unsure economy, inflation in the upcoming year was declared to be less than what economists today predict. Accordingly, $1.353 billion was removed from the Pentagon's operating, procurement and research budgets based on Congress's "expert" prognostications.

The grand total of all these reductions comes to at least $7.3 billion by my count.

Don't get me wrong - the Pentagon budget is huge and unimaginably bloated. However, Congress hasn't bothered to find out where, and it repeatedly selects to cut spending in DOD operating and payroll accounts that are actually underfunded.

Why do the Democrats and Republicans in Congress undertake these phony and arbitrary cuts? Why don't they hunt down and cut the bloat, especially in the procurement and research accounts where many programs have nothing to do with fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or anything else that poses a real threat to the United States?

It's really quite simple.

In this bill, Congress added more than 2,100 "earmarks" for specific spending projects in congressional districts costing somewhere between $5 billion and $10 billion - analysts are still calculating the pork's total cost. The projects vary from a $2 million brown tree snake eradication program in Hawaii, which Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, added to the Pentagon's Defense Health Program, to an "intermodal marine facility" Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, added for the port of Anchorage for $11 million. The list goes on and on and on.

To pay for the pork, Congress did not add money to the bill. Instead, it opted for "offsets." It could have cut deeper into unnecessary procurement and research programs, but that would be biting the corporate hand that feeds congressmen and women with campaign contributions, and it would impair the opportunity to boast to constituents that the politicians are bringing home the bacon with local spending. What better place to cut than the obscure and technical military payroll and operating budgets that no one watches and that has little payoff according to today's political thinking.

This is not the first time both the Republicans and Democrats in Congress raided the most fundamentally important part of the Pentagon budget to pay for politically driven junk, and it is not the first time no one in Washington did anything to stop it.

It will also not be the last time. They will keep it up until they know they are being watched and realize that if they don't do something about it, others will.

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