

Gates signals revolution in pentagon spending

by The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

In his farewell address as president, Dwight Eisenhower, who knew a thing or two about war, coined the phrase "military-industrial complex" to describe the "conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry ... new in the American experience."

As Eisenhower, the pride of Abilene, Kan., warned, "The total influence — economic, political, even spiritual — is felt in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal government. ... Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society."

This week, another Kansas Republican, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, took dead aim at Ike's nemesis by proposing to shift Pentagon spending priorities away from big-ticket weapons systems. He and Obama want to spend far less on strategic weapons and more on military manpower and tactical weapons used in counter-insurgency warfare.

Overall military spending — \$664 billion next year, including the cost of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq — would increase by 4 percent, but priorities would change. This revolution has been talked about for a long time, but the military-industrial complex and its allies in Congress have always beaten it back.

To be sure, they may beat it back this time, but odds are Gates and Obama will get most of what they asked for. With the federal budget already in record deficit, there's no way to pay for exotic weapons and increased manpower and readiness, too. Gates and Obama are right in their priorities.

This is a signal moment in the long battle to fix military procurement policies. Pentagon weapons systems are, collectively, nearly \$300 billion over budget. Accountability is negligible. The system requires sound military and budgetary assessments and continual oversight. What Gates did this week, at long last, is a move in the right direction.

The most high-profile target on Mr. Gates' hit list is the Air Force's F-22 Raptor, a fighter plane so advanced that no other plane in the world is likely to touch it for at least 20 years. The Air Force wants 381 of them, but Gates wants to end production at 187. Reason: They cost \$179 million each; \$350 million each when development costs are rolled in.

Lockheed-Martin is the prime contractor for the F-22; Boeing's St. Louis-based defense unit is a major subcontractor, though few jobs here would be affected. Boeing also would be a loser in Gates' decision to whack \$87 billion from the Army's Future Combat System contract for an eight-soldier high-tech fighting vehicle. Boeing St. Louis will continue to build 35 more F/A-18 Super Hornets for the Navy.

The military-industrial complex will fight these and other cuts with every weapon in its arsenal - lobbying campaigns, ad campaigns and political contributions. Too much is at stake to fall for facile arguments.

What Eisenhower said in 1961 still is true today: "Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals so that security and liberty may prosper together."

Reprinted From The St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Distributed By Creators Syndicate Inc.

Gates signals revolution in pentagon spending by The St. Louis Post-Dispatch