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President Bush's new budget request calls for more than double the amount of spending on defense accounts than did the budget he inherited from his predecessor. Yet according to some Republicans and Democrats, the United States still is not spending enough on defense.

Less than a week after Bush's proposed fiscal 2009 budget arrived on Capitol Hill, lawmakers already are drafting plans to add money for weapons that the administration did not request but that the individual military services would like to have. These include more C-17 transport planes, more F-22 warplanes, possibly another Virginia-class submarine and an LPD-17 amphibious ship, according to members and aides from both chambers.

Reinforcing the services' quiet campaign for these weapons are legions of lobbyists and defense contractors. And with many of the weapons produced in their states and districts, a number of lawmakers have a parochial interest in legislating more defense funds for such programs.

Advocates say these weapons systems are cutting-edge technologies needed for today's threats. But as Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates tries to focus more of the military's attention on fighting counter-insurgencies like the one in Iraq, critics question the strategic and economic value of adding dogfighting warplanes, submarines and amphibious landing craft to the defense budget.

Such weapons, they argue, divert resources from the more urgent investment in highly trained soldiers whose understanding of exotic cultures and languages is now just as important as their hardware.

"The fixation Congress has with buying irrelevant hardware definitely retards the country's ability to respond to modern warfare," said Winslow Wheeler, a former congressional staff aide who now directs the Straus Military Reform Project at the Center for Defense Information, a nonpartisan military research group.

“We delude ourselves into thinking this gigantic budget prepares us to adequately deal with these challenges,” he said.

Bush requested \$607 billion in discretionary budget authority for defense in fiscal 2009, including military construction, operations and maintenance, personnel, weapons procurement and nuclear programs. The total is expected to climb even higher when he requests additional funds for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In contrast, the fiscal 2000 budget Bush inherited from President Bill Clinton -totaled \$301 billion for defense.

In Congress, Full Speed Ahead

On Capitol Hill, the message of Wheeler and other critics is not gaining much traction. Rather than wait until the fiscal 2009 Defense appropriations bills come before Congress, lawmakers plan to insert as many additional weapons systems as they can into the next fiscal 2008 war spending supplemental this spring. Many of the projects that do not make it into the supplemental will be put into the regular military spending bills. In the fight for defense dollars, the programs with the most congressional support will win funding.

One such program is the F-22 fighter plane. On Feb. 6, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley updated House Defense appropriators on design flaws that have grounded more than a third of his 441 older F-15 fighter jets. Moseley also took up lawmakers’ concerns over how many F-22s would be needed to fill the fighter plane gap this year, beyond the 20 new warplanes the administration has sought.

On the same day, Gates appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee, where James M. Inhofe, R-Okla., pressed him on the need for more F-22s. Gates said the administration’s goal of 183 F-22s was sufficient, even though he noted that the Air Force was lobbying for nearly twice that number — a goal Inhofe supports.

“The reality is we are fighting two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the F-22 has not performed a single mission in either theater,” Gates said.

But Gates made little headway with lawmakers who represent places where the F-22 is manufactured by Boeing and Lockheed Martin — primarily in Texas, California, Mississippi, Washington and Georgia.

“It’s the president’s proposal, but the president can’t appropriate a penny,” said John Cornyn, R-Texas, an Armed Services panel member. “The Air Force thinks they need more. I think they’ve made a pretty good case for F-22s.”

Politically Resilient Weapons

Congress also routinely adds enough Boeing C-17 transport planes to the budget to keep its production lines open. The administration requested none of the planes in its defense request.

But like the F-22, the C-17s are politically resilient because some 700 contractors in 42 states build them, chiefly in California, Missouri, Georgia and Arizona.

"We need the C-17 line kept alive," said Sen. Christopher S. Bond, R-Mo.

Democrats are also strong supporters of these programs. John P. Murtha, D-Pa., chairman of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, said he would try to put money for C-17s, C-130s, F-22s and F-35 jets into the fiscal 2008 supplemental when Congress takes it up this spring. If that move fails, he said he would try to add the money to the regular defense budget.

Veteran House appropriator Norm Dicks, D-Wash., a strong supporter of Boeing, agreed. "I'm very concerned about the aging of our aircraft fleet," Dicks said. "The C-17 and the F-22 — those two stand out."

Funding for more shipbuilding is also likely to be boosted, lawmakers and aides said. Lawmakers from Virginia and Connecticut, where the submarines are made, may try to add some \$2 billion to the defense budget for a second Virginia-class submarine, or at least enough funding to begin building it.

Aides say a more likely addition to the Navy budget is an LPD-17 amphibious transport dock ship, made by Northrop Grumman Ship Systems in Mississippi and Louisiana. Murtha said his panel would "absolutely" add money for additional shipbuilding work.