

February 11, 2008 - Murtha and the Cost of War

The Washington Post

www.washington-post.com

Murtha and the Cost of the War

By Walter Pincus

Monday, February 11, 2008; A11

One longtime House member's views of the hidden costs of the war in Iraq are worth studying -- when the congressman is Rep. John P. Murtha (D-Pa.), chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee on defense.

Murtha was a Marine officer during the Vietnam War, earning a Bronze Star and two Purple Heart medals. Murtha, in his 34th year in Congress, is an outspoken critic of the Bush administration's Iraq policy.

He holds strong views about the effect of the war on the U.S. military and the public, which he detailed in a speech last week to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a nonpartisan Washington think tank.

"Less than 1 percent of the public is making the sacrifice that these troops [in Iraq and Afghanistan] are making," Murtha said. He noted his proposal for a war tax, which was shot down by the Democratic leadership.

"You can't put a trillion-dollar war on a credit card and leave the bills for our children to pay," he said. "The same Americans suffering in Iraq today will be paying for this borrowed war for the rest of their lives."

In other words, he suggested, the same troops who are fighting now will end up paying for the cost of the war.

Murtha is a strong advocate of the 24-year-old Defense Department Family Advocacy Program, which pays for counseling for service members dealing with several issues, from their children's truancy to emotional or sexual abuse of spouses. He said that troops at U.S. military bases have told him about their families' need for counseling.

As a result, Murtha last year added \$147 million to the fiscal 2008 appropriations bill for the Family Advocacy Program,

increasing the amount from the administration's request of \$253 million. In President Bush's proposed fiscal 2009 budget, sent to Congress last week, funding for the program was cut to \$244 million.

Noting that the administration is spending \$343 million every 24 hours on the Iraq war, Murtha said that 11 hours in Iraq "could restore \$156 million cut by the president's Defense Department budget for the Family Advocacy Program."

While Murtha was in Afghanistan recently, the subject of divorce and pressure on military families came up. A troop commander described his soldiers as "worried about their families," Murtha said, referring to the stress that comes from knowing "that if you were deployed over and over again, you were going to be at a point where the pressure is tremendous on what's going on" at home.

Another cost of the war, Murtha said, is the declining quality of recruits joining the volunteer Army. Murtha said he favors a draft because he believes "you could never sustain a long-term deployment with a volunteer Army . . . and it would cost very much in order to try to sustain these kind of deployments."

Citing Army statistics, Murtha said that since the beginning of the Iraq war, the percentage of Army recruits with high school diplomas has dropped from 94 to 71, and the proportion of recruits who require waivers for criminal records increased from 4.6 percent to 11.2 percent.

Equally telling, he continued, are the soaring sums paid for retention and enlistment bonuses. In fiscal 2003, before the Iraq war, the Army spent \$157 million, he said; today it pays \$1 billion annually.

"They're even paying captains and majors to stay," Murtha said. "People that left West Point in 2001, 46 percent got out; in 2002, 52 percent got out." The reason these young officers are leaving, he said, is "because their families are saying, 'Look, you get out or I'm going to leave you.'"

Murtha also cited the war's cost on maintenance of major military equipment. The average age of F-15 fighter aircraft, used for precision bombing, is 24 years, and most are beyond the safe flying time of 4,500 hours. There are 162 "down right now trying to find out what's wrong with them," said Murtha, who earlier in the week held a closed hearing with the Air Force. "Flying hour costs have increased 87 percent. Depot maintenance has increased 800 man-hours for every F-15.

"The military is in worse shape than they were seven years ago. No question -- everybody will tell you that."