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The top defense appropriator in the House said he is preparing to again add politically popular military pay and benefit increases to the upcoming supplemental spending bill — but he also assailed supplementals as the epitome of irresponsible budgeting.

John P. Murtha, D-Pa., the chairman of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee, told an audience at the Center for American Progress on Wednesday that his panel has begun discussing how to handle the \$82 billion request it expects soon from the administration. The money would fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for the remainder of fiscal 2009.

Murtha said his panel will add money to give a \$500 per month salary bonus to all 185,000 soldiers who have been held past their deployment commitments since 2001 in the Army's "stop loss" program. That could cost about \$600 million.

Lawmakers will also add unspecified funds to improve bases and housing for military members and their families at home, Murtha said.

Nevertheless, Murtha criticized the use of war spending in supplementals, which has totaled about \$859 billion since Sept. 11, 2001, according to the Congressional Research Service. Their cost does not fall under the constraints of the base defense budget because it is deemed emergency spending.

"The supplementals have got to go. We cannot have a sensible appropriations if we don't get rid of the supplementals," Murtha complained.

Military Production and Budget Shortfalls

Murtha said the next supplemental will also probably contain some money for F-22 fighters and some unrequested funding for C-17 airlifters.

But Murtha said he was confused by constantly changing messages from the Air Force over the requirement for the F-22. He also criticized the Navy for going back and forth over whether to build the expensive new DDG-1000 destroyer or buy more of the older but cheaper DDG-51 destroyers.

“Somebody has to make a decision about how many of these things do you need,” Murtha said. “This drives me crazy, and we’re trying to come up with a budget that makes sense.”

Murtha’s comments come at a time when the entire defense community is grappling with how to trim budgets while simultaneously preparing for both conventional threats and the irregular warfare activities the military now faces. There is little consensus, however, about how to achieve that goal.

“The Department of Defense must set priorities and consider inescapable trade-offs and opportunity costs,” Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates wrote in a Foreign Affairs magazine article released last week.

Gates said there must be more support for irregular capabilities and a drive to curtail some conventional modernization programs, which he described as “deeply embedded in the Defense Department’s budget, in its bureaucracy, in the defense industry, and in Congress.”

The Center for American Progress released a report to coincide with Murtha’s speech that called for the Pentagon to stop production of the Air Force’s F-22 fighter, cancel the Navy’s DDG-1000 destroyer and cut by one-third the budget for the Army’s Future Combat Systems over the next four years.

Murtha didn’t endorse those cuts, but he said a combination of procurement changes and personnel cutbacks would be needed to achieve savings. He said the Army and Marine Corps would have to slow their plan to expand their ranks by 65,000 and 27,000, respectively, by 2013.

He also recommended paying for more weapons systems up front as a way to save money in the long run. Buying items such as the new DDG-1000 destroyer one at a time pushes costs up, he argued.

“We have to buy at a quantity that gives stability to industry enough to get the price down,” Murtha said.

Dissent and Support Within Caucus

Some leading defense-minded Democrats are set to oppose Murtha's call for a slowdown in the plans to expand the army.

Rep. Ellen O. Tauscher, D-Calif., the chairwoman of the House Armed Services Strategic Forces Subcommittee, defended increased personnel numbers in a Dec. 9 speech as a means of taking pressure off of a force strained by six years of war.

"Increasing end-strength must start immediately," Tauscher said. "Because expanding the size of the military will be expensive and take several years, it must begin now to yield ready units in two or three years."

Not all Democratic lawmakers agree that supplemental bills should be used as a means to fund items not covered in the regular budget.

Rep. Joe Sestak, D-Pa., a former Navy admiral who now serves on the Armed Services Committee, criticized how Congress has added non-war-related items in supplemental bills over the years. He cited Joint Strike Fighters, which will not be built until 2014, and anti-submarine helicopters as glaring examples.

"We need to get control of the emergency supplementals," Sestak told the Center for American Progress event.

While Congress and the Pentagon share the blame for abusing the supplementals, Sestak said, he acknowledged there was little chance lawmakers would end their habit of adding money for projects built by workers in their districts.

"That's the Constitution; you are elected by your people," Sestak said. "So I don't have a solution for that."

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