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Stimulus is not panacea, Rep. Murtha says

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The economic stimulus package being debated by Congress will not be the salvation for America that some in the Barack Obama administration claim it will be, according to Rep. John Murtha, D-Johnstown.

Murtha, speaking Monday with Indiana University of Pennsylvania students via a video conference hookup from his Washington, D.C., office, predicted that the hundreds of millions of dollars more routinely allocated as appropriations will create more jobs and do more to restore health to America's economy than will the stimulus bill.

The hour-long video conference gave about 20 students in Mac Fiddner's American Foreign Policy class an opportunity to pose questions to one of the most powerful members of Congress. Murtha is the chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense and has traveled around the world leading congressional and presidential fact-finding missions, meeting with foreign leaders, monitoring international elections and representing the U.S. Congress abroad.

"This president inherited a real mess. We have a real problem here," Murtha said, referring to the sinking national economy.

One student, who said her father has been out of work for a year, asked how soon the stimulus package might bring new jobs to western Pennsylvania.

Murtha said it is hoped that the stimulus bill will have an impact, but appropriations - like the hundreds of millions spent in recent years to extend sewage and water infrastructure and build electric generating stations - will likely do more to create new and diversified jobs.

"It (the stimulus package) is not going to do everything we'd like to see for every area of the country," Murtha said.

He was also asked to discuss in the video conference how Congress impacts foreign policy.

"We affect it mainly by money and by how we talk to the president," he said.

As an example, he referred anecdotally to the movie, "Charlie Wilson's War," in which, despite the Reagan administration's hesitancy to do so, Congress appropriated money to supply Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to the Afghan mujahideen who were fighting the Russians.

The money, Murtha said, went through his committee to Pakistan and then into Afghanistan.

"The president's power is a perception of power," Murtha said. He said that when he went to Washington in the early stages of the Watergate scandal, President Richard Nixon had won nearly every state in the country.

"A year later, he was without power," Murtha said.

Similarly, "(George W. Bush) lost his credibility. ... The public lost confidence in the president."

The elder Bush, Murtha said, was probably the best-experienced president in terms of foreign policy. By contrast, Murtha said he once sent a letter to the younger Bush and waited seven months for a reply.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait, President H. W. Bush paid attention to the counsel given by members of Congress.

"We also said you have to have a clear plan of what you want to do," and have other nations involved in the effort to oust Iraq from Kuwait, he said.

The result, Murtha said, was that the first Gulf War cost \$65 billion, but it only cost the United States \$5 billion.

"Bush did it exactly right," Murtha said.

He repeated the advice recently when he met with retired Marine Corps Gen. James L. Jones, the Obama administration's national security advisor.

"We appropriate the money, but we want to see the plan," Murtha said he told Jones.

Murtha said the "best answer" to America's current foreign entanglements is to get American troops out of Iraq as soon as possible, and not to have a big build-up of American troops in Afghanistan.

Murtha also favors a return to a military draft. He said he believes that everyone ought to sacrifice if America is going to be in a war. According to Murtha, 70 percent of American troops who fought in World War II were drafted, compared to 40 percent in the Vietnam War.

There are serious problems now in America's military, he said, because the same people are going back to the war too often.

"They're deployed more than they're home," Murtha said. "It's too hard on the troops that are serving."

Murtha regards instability in Pakistan as the largest foreign policy challenge facing America.

"The second is Iran, and the likelihood it will have nuclear capability in the next few years," he said.

The answers to these foreign policy challenges, in Murtha's opinion, should not be military but diplomatic.

"And not just the United States. Other countries must be involved," he said. "I am hopeful this administration will talk as much as we can with other countries," and listen to their opinions.

Murtha urged the IUP students participating in the video conference to consider foreign policy careers with the U.S. Department of State.

