

**Main focus for Senate is next year's defense budget proposal**

04/08/02

NPR - "All Things Considered"

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And I'm Robert Siegel.

The Senate is back today from a two-week recess. There is a stack of legislation to tackle, everything from a contentious energy bill debate that resumed today to reinstating fast-track trade authority to banning all human cloning. A floor battle also looms over the budget resolution the Democrats have drafted for next year. The part of the proposed budget that gets the biggest increase by far is defense. As NPR's David Welna reports from the Capitol, the Democrat-controlled Senate may end up approving much of what the president wants. DAVID WELNA reporting:

Barely nine months ago Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was telling the House Armed Services Committee that the Pentagon had to do a better job of spending its budget rather than demanding more money.

Secretary DONALD RUMSFELD (Defense Department): Where is it going to come from? It can't constantly be more. There has to be some way to manage this thing so that we can effectively be sensitive and respectful of the taxpayers' dollars.

WELNA: Rumsfeld back then was promising a top to bottom review of all defense spending with Vice President Dick Cheney warning that Rumsfeld may have to, in his words, break some china at the Pentagon. But that drive for reform was one more victim of the September 11th attacks. Earlier this year President Bush used his State of the Union Address to make the case for a 13 percent hike in the Pentagon's budget.

President GEORGE W. BUSH: My budget includes the largest increase in defense spending in two decades because while the price of freedom and security is high, it is never too high.

Whatever it costs to defend our country, we will pay.

WELNA: Lawmakers gave the president a standing ovation. His proposed increase of more than \$46 billion swells the defense budget to \$400 billion. More than half the federal spending lawmakers have a say over. Brookings Institution defense policy expert Michael O'Hanlon says President Bush is no longer interested in pinching pennies at the Pentagon.

Mr. MICHAEL O'HANLON (Brookings Institution): After September 11th he and Secretary Rumsfeld became traditional conservative Republicans. They decided that politically and substantively they were simply going to give the services most of what they wanted in general, and most of that had little to do with the war on terrorism.

WELNA: O'Hanlon figures between only 10 and 20 percent of the proposed defense increase is tied to fighting terrorism. Still, most Democrats in Congress are nervous about being called soft on defense so they've said little about the big spending increase.

One rare exception is Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky of Illinois, who warns much of the new spending may well be wasted. Meanwhile, she expects Congress will take a very close look at the \$14 billion needed to reauthorize the reformed federal welfare program.

Representative JAN SCHAKOWSKY (Democrat, Illinois): I'm sure that will get a lot of scrutiny. Every single penny of that that goes to poor women and children, but I think that the defense budget may get an easier ride.

WELNA: So far lawmakers have given little scrutiny to the defense budget. Only four of the 22 senators on the Budget Committee even bothered to attend a recent hearing on the subject. Kent Conrad, the committee's Democratic chair, declared at the outset he'd summon several experts to testify, who had serious questions about the proposed boost in defense spending.

Senator KENT CONRAD (Democrat, Budget Committee): Unfortunately, we do face a budget situation that requires us to examine every part of federal spending. We can't provide a blank check to any part of the federal government, because we're facing trust fund deficits as far as the eye can see.

WELNA: The Brookings Institution's O'Hanlon told the committee much of the spending hike would go for unnecessary military pay raises, and Josh Weston of the non-partisan Business Executives for National Security said the Pentagon has submitted a business as usual budget while its obsolete accounting systems are crying out for reform.

Mr. JOSH WESTON (Business Executives for National Security): The Pentagon will spend on the order of \$4 trillion in the next 10 years in thousands of programs for which there is really no effective financial oversight or control.

WELNA: And yet the only senator who really challenged the new defense spending at the hearing was the one Republican who showed up, New Mexico's Pete Domenici. He complained that \$10 billion of that increase is for a wartime contingency fund to be spent at the sole

discretion of the White House, not Congress.

Senator PETE DOMENICI (Republican, New Mexico): When you give defense as big an increase as this, and you're trying to hold many of the other departments to much lesser numbers, there's got to be some way that you can be assured that most of the defense money will go to defense.

WELNA: But when the hearing was over, committee chair Conrad essentially took back his earlier assertion about no blank checks for this year's budget.

Sen. CONRAD: The president is going to get largely what he asked for in defense. This is a time of conflict and the Congress, I predict, will respond, sending a very clear message to adversaries that we stand shoulder to shoulder.

WELNA: Indeed, the budget resolution Conrad's committee has submitted for the Senate's approval provides the entire defense increase the president asked for. David Welna, NPR News, the Capitol.