

Amazing Waste

Another Pentagon spending shocker

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As the nation's deficit spirals upward, driven by the costs of our military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is shocking to learn that Defense Department waste continues at epic proportions.

Yes, this one is shocking, even after we've spent years seeing revelation after revelation of mammoth Pentagon cost overruns and wasteful spending sprees. Investigators from Congress' General Accounting Office have calculated that the Defense Department has wasted about \$100 million in the last six years on airline tickets that went unused. That's hundreds of thousands of refundable airline tickets that were purchased, never used, and no refund was ever requested. They might as well have been throwing bales of money straight into an incinerator.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky, an Illinois Democrat who is one of three lawmakers who sought the probe (the other two are Republicans), provides the proper perspective: "At a time when our soldiers are patrolling the streets of Iraq in unarmored Humvees, and when the Bush administration is asking for record defense spending, Secretary (Donald) Rumsfeld is letting hundreds of millions of dollars that could be used to protect our troops and our country go to waste."

We'd stop short of pinning the whole thing on Rumsfeld, given that the practice clearly predates the Bush administration. But with the waste now revealed, the defense secretary needs to move quickly to see that the damage is undone and that henceforth, airline tickets are either used or the fare refunded.

We have little faith in the deja vu official statement the Pentagon issued in response to the revelation: "We take this deficiency in our procedures very seriously and are moving swiftly to establish proper management controls." Our message to Rumsfeld: Prove it.

And while they're at it, how about continuing to take inventory and do audits? Congress and the GAO shouldn't stop here. The Defense Department has a long and sorry record on the matter of fiscal prudence and needs continuous monitoring. Who decided to stop watching the cookie jar?