

Inside the Army

ABERCROMBIE: ARMY FACES 'FUNDAMENTAL CHOICE' BETWEEN SIZE, EQUIPMENT

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The fiscal year 2010 budget should force the Army to make hard choices between growing the force and buying the items on its acquisition wish list, according to the chairman of the House Armed Services air and land forces subcommittee.

Speaking March 11 at a defense conference sponsored by Aviation Week in Washington, **Rep. Neil Abercrombie** (D-HI) sharply lashed out at the Army, which he said has not fully discussed the fiscal consequences of growing its force.

The Army's current plan calls for the addition of 74,000 troops -- 65,000 of them in the active component -- by 2010.

"When it comes to the Army, the fundamental choice is keeping the larger Army we have today or pursuing the massive list of Army acquisition programs on the books," Abercrombie told the audience. "Believe me, this acquisition monster has come home to roost -- to come into the rookery, if you will -- and suck up all the oxygen in the room.

"Despite the Army's desire to pursue both goals that I've outlined here, doing so is not affordable, and it's arguably unnecessary, depending on what the point of view [is] and what we want the Army to be ready to do," he continued.

He suggested that the Army consider creating a true strategic reserve, arguing that it no longer has one now because of its increased reliance on the Army National Guard and Reserve. Though the Army says the two now function as an operational reserve, Abercrombie said that term amounts to the service's "being nice."

"It's not an operational reserve -- it's an operational element of the United States military right now," he said. "The entire mission of the National Guard and Reserve has been altered, possibly irretrievably, and there hasn't been a serious discussion about it in the country."

"The merits of this decision about, in this instance, the Army National Guard [are] clearly debatable, but what is even more troubling is the lack of explanation for what such a dramatic change would mean in terms of funding and resources," he added.

Stressing the serious financial consequences associated with adding to the active-duty force, Abercrombie said the move should not be undertaken without a decision on how the active force will be used in the future.

He noted that a true strategic reserve could also provide states with additional capacity.

Meanwhile, Abercrombie also called for more accurate information from the Army on its materiel programs.

"The Army needs to present a clear and realistic picture of what the future Army is going to look like and what purpose it will serve," he said today. "It has to stop propagandizing, it has to stop finessing this, it has to stop trying to sell us.

"That's what the guy on TV is for. George Foreman does that, and he does it better than the Pentagon does," he continued.

Abercrombie singled out the Future Combat Systems program, the Army's top modernization effort, which he said he initially supported.

Now, he said, the effort is "in the mess it's in today" because it entered into the system development phase before its technologies were ready.

"The comics are for drawing Flash Gordon; the comics are no place to put the lives of future combat soldiers at stake," he said. "You don't do it on paper; you do it in reality."

Abercrombie also blamed Congress for being "too willing to go along with funding programs that are clearly broken, vastly over cost, based on more desire, aspiration and hope than any realistic cost or technology analysis."

The congressman called for change in this year's budget, noting that the Army may have to accept the technological unreadiness of FCS.

"Given the uncertainties we face at home and abroad, the best approach may be to focus on low-risk ways to continue the superiority our Army has today while continuing to make modest investments in the future that are focused on key areas where improvements are most needed," Abercrombie said. "That seems to me a sensible approach."

"Some of the defense industry may not like that approach, but continuing the business-as-usual approach of pursuing gold-plated unaffordable programs is no longer possible," he continued. "It simply never should have been in the plans in the first place."