

Congressman Neil Abercrombie Statement for the Record on HR 5122  
29 September 2006

I am pleased to support this year's National Defense Authorization Act. It includes many provisions that are vital to giving our military the tools it needs to defend the nation, although it also leaves much work undone that will have to be addressed in the future.

The bill addresses one issue in particular that merits attention. Despite the Pentagon's repeated denials of a military readiness crisis, this bill authorizes an additional \$23 billion in funding as a down payment on the damage to the US Army and Marine Corps from repeated and sustained deployments to Iraq, and the Bush Administration's decision to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan through a parade of emergency supplemental appropriations. The wars themselves are wearing down our equipment at a tremendous rate. Further damage is done by supplemental appropriations because the military services are denied the funding they need in a timely and predictable fashion. These two factors are doing serious and long-term damage to the nation's military readiness, and the Congress must address them.

During Armed Services Committee deliberations on this bill in March 2006, I offered an amendment to add \$42 billion for this reason. Sadly, that amendment was defeated on a party-line vote. I offered the amendment because we had a growing readiness problem and because I thought putting as much of the funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as possible into the base budget was the most honest and effective way to proceed. My approach ended up in the final version of this bill. The \$23 billion in this year's bill is a good start, but this funding will have to be sustained in many subsequent bills to address the readiness crisis we continue to face.

I am also pleased that this bill includes many important legislative provisions that directly improve the lives of the people of my district and my state. First, it takes the first step toward dealing with the chemical munitions dumped off the coast of Hawaii in the 1940s. These weapons could still pose a serious health and environmental risk, and Section 314 of this bill requires a comprehensive research effort by the military to identify, analyze, and assess the potential threat these sites may pose.

Section 2843 of this bill addresses a major land transfer issue in Hawaii regarding the former Barbers Point Naval Air Station. Affordable housing for the people of Hawaii and a new public transit system are critical local issues. This language requires the Navy to turn over an important parcel of land that will allow both new housing and transit development. Balancing the needs of the military and the local population in Hawaii is a challenge, but in this case, I think an arrangement was reached that helps both sides accomplish their goals. I want to thank Chairman Hunter and Chairman Hefley for working with me on this language.

Lastly, Section 343 of the bill requires an analysis by the Army of its future live-fire training infrastructure needs in Hawaii. The Army's presence in Hawaii is undergoing tremendous change. A new Stryker Brigade is due to be activated this coming year, and thousands more troops will be coming to Hawaii as part of the larger changes in the military's Pacific region basing posture. Supporting these growing needs while accommodating the cultural, environmental and quality of life concerns of the people of Hawaii is essential. This report will help Congress understand where the Army wants to go in Hawaii its training infrastructure, and how to get there. In particular, it will address the sensitive issue of the Army's long-term future in the Makua Valley, an area of Hawaii owned by the people of Hawaii and on temporary loan to the military. Eventually, this land must be returned, so the report requires the Army to look beyond its current use of the Makua Valley toward the eventual return of this historic and environmentally sensitive treasure to the people of Hawaii.

There are critical quality of life issues that were not resolved. Specifically, it does not do enough to help military families who need the Survivor Benefit Program and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation offset repealed. For me, this is a basic issue of fairness that must be addressed at some point in the future. The bill does not do enough to protect TRICARE health insurance patients from skyrocketing prescription drug prices. The Department of Defense asked for legislative authority to negotiate lower prices with major drug companies. The majority was unwilling to let this provision into the final bill. Finally, the bill before us only provides a 2.2% pay raise for the military in 2007. This is meager thanks for our men and women in uniform in a time of war; for those who are experiencing sustained and repeated deployments and absences from their families.

As well, this raise is simply too small to help our military families keep up with rising cost of living expenses at many bases around the nation, and especially in Hawaii. We have asked a lot from these men and women. We owe them more in return.

I want to now turn to the portion of the bill that falls under the jurisdiction of the Tactical Air and Land Forces Subcommittee, on which I am proud to serve as the ranking minority member. This year, the subcommittee had a daunting task: to reconcile a budget submission that was simply unrealistic in some respects when compared to the needs of the military both today and in the future.

Our military is clearly being pulled in many directions at once. Today our forces are fighting unconventional wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the demands of which, in terms of equipment, are very different from possible future conventional conflicts. The US military has to be able to fight and win both types of wars, but there is clearly not enough funding for doing everything the services want to do.

This bill authorizes critical short-term needs such as modernization of Army equipment in combat today and increased production of aircraft like the C-17 that are absolutely vital to current military operations. The bill also looks to the future in continuing successful aviation and ground systems. Finally, it takes funding from a few programs that are off-track or not working and moves that funding to more pressing needs, ensuring that taxpayer dollars are not wasted.

It also demands additional analysis and testing of systems in development that the subcommittee has concerns about. These provisions may discomfort some people at the Pentagon, but it is Congress' duty to oversee these programs and ensure that the troops get what they need.

Overall, this year I think the subcommittee did an excellent job. I especially want to commend Chairman Weldon on his leadership of the Tactical Air and Land Forces Subcommittee. His willingness to work in an open and nonpartisan manner greatly facilitates the subcommittee's work and produces a better product for our troops and the civilians who serve the nation at the Department of Defense.

Finally, another member of this committee deserves special recognition. I worked for many years with Joel Hefley on the Armed Services Committee. He is both a valued colleague and a close friend. Among his many accomplishments during his distinguished career on this committee, he helped shepherd through one of the most important changes in military housing construction in decades. His vision for leveraging private investment dollars into a massive new program to rebuild and rehabilitate military family housing is now a reality. In my state alone almost ten thousand military homes will be upgraded in the next few years. This housing is a vital part of keeping an all-volunteer military ready, and Joel Hefley was a leader in this revolutionary program. I was and am grateful for the opportunity afforded to me to partner with him in accomplishing passage and implementation of this key legislation enhancing the quality of life of our fighting men and women.