Member's Signature

EXTENSION OF REMARKS

THE HONORABLE BARNEY FRANK

(MA-04)

February 2, 2010

"YOU CAN'T SUCCEED AT DEFICIT REDUCTION WITHOUT REALLY TRYING"

Madam Speaker, there is wide agreement that we should be taking tough measures to reduce the budget deficit. There appears at present to be a powerful myth that this can be done without attacking the biggest single area of increase in the federal budget in recent years, the military budget.

The transition from the Clinton to the Bush administration, which meant a transition from a surplus to a deficit situation, had as its single most important cause a decision by President Bush to fight two wars with five tax cuts. While President Obama has not repeated that same pattern, his announcement that he is going to begin deficit reduction, while exempting the ever-increasing military budget from the same scrutiny that goes to other federal expenditures, means either that deficit reduction in both the near and long term is either doomed to failure, or that devastating cuts will occur in virtually every federal program that aims at improving the quality of our lives.

I intend to work with many others to make the case that over the next ten years we can save substantial amounts of money – a trillion or more of currently proposed expenditures – by reexamining some of the fundamental premises of American military policy. Some of those are based on Cold War assumptions – the need for three separate delivery systems for several nuclear weapons, which was designed in an era of confrontation with the Soviet Union. We also must suggest the notion that America can be the world's pacifier, policemen etc. Our security interest must be protected, and there are beleaguered nations threatened with hostile, foreign assaults where our support is justified. But our range of commitments goes far beyond that and must be scaled back.

There are also obviously places where the current military budget can be cut, even before we begin to reduce the level of commitments. In the very useful publication *Congress Daily* for Monday, February 1st, a thoughtful and experienced journalist, who is an expert on the military budget, George C. Wilson, cogently rebuts the President's assertion that military requirements mean that we cannot subject the huge and growing Pentagon budget to the kind of scrutiny that goes elsewhere. Note that Mr. Wilson is talking primarily about a budget aimed at the current level commitments. A serious review of those commitments, which should result in a reduction in their scope, would allow us to go much further in reduction, reaching the magnitude of savings that are needed for us to be able to have the military budget make a substantial contribution to deficit reduction.

Madam Speaker, no issue before us is more important than the need for people to include a realistic assessment of military spending in any effort to reduce the deficit much less this year, or over the next ten. I ask that George C. Wilson's extremely well-argued article, which makes such an essential contribution in this debate, be printed here.

Fattest Lady Singing
Congress Daily

February 1, 2010
George C. Wilson

In declaring in his State of the Union address that he won't cut the Pentagon budget, President Obama is like a trainer telling the fattest lady in his class that she need not do her exercises. Why didn't Obama order the fat Defense Department to join the government-wide effort to reduce the deficit by killing off weapons that no longer make sense?

Two-thirds of our casualties in the Iraq War were inflicted by hidden bombs that the bad guys set off by cell phones or other simple devices available at Radio Shack. Neither our new aircraft carriers costing $12 billion apiece nor our new F-22 fighter aircraft costing $350 million a plane can keep our troops from being killed or wounded by cheap improvised explosive devices.

This doesn't mean that deficit cutters should cancel such super weapons willy nilly. More conventional wars than the ones in Iraq and Afghanistan may well be in America's future. But Obama and Congress should at least order Defense Secretary Gates and his deputies to justify every major weapon by explaining what red-hot threat out there justifies spending fresh billions on it.

The GAO drew a good road map for conducting such a review last year in its devastating report on Pentagon cost overruns. Entitled "Defense Acquisitions: Assessments of Selected Weapon Programs," the GAO studied 96 major weapons in 2008 and discovered that the contractors' original price tag had nothing to do with reality.

The cost overruns on the weapons studied totaled $296.4 billion. Just making the contractors, not the taxpayers, eat their own cost overruns would reduce the deficit by almost $300 billion.

Instead of making such a demand, Obama last Wednesday gave defense contractors, their overseers in the Pentagon and Congress a pass: "Starting in 2011 we are prepared to freeze government spending for three years. Spending related to our national security, Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security will not be affected. But all other discretionary government programs will."

Where is Congress in this supposed war against the deficit that Obama just declared? The Founding Fathers in Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution gave Congress the power to "provide for the common defense," not the president.

When are the lawmakers going to start cutting Pentagon programs like outrageously expensive warships, planes that soar over the price tags contractors originally put on them and missile defenses that have a lot bigger flaws than Toyota's stuck gas pedals?

"Never," is the answer I get from some of the walking wounded who fought in past battles of the Pentagon budget. They say any weapons, whether justified by today's threats or not, get protected by lawmakers as long as they provide jobs back home.

Congress, these vets contend, to reassert its constitutional right to provide for the common defense, should deny money to produce any weapon before it is thoroughly tested; forbid congressional add-ons to the Pentagon budget unless CBO and GAO have determined what the pet project would cost and, if deemed worthy, conduct an open competition to build it; forbid any congressional staffer from vaulting to a job in the Pentagon or defense industry.

Obama did take one step toward making congressional wheeling and dealing on add-ons more transparent by declaring in his address that "I'm calling on Congress to publish all earmark requests on a single Web site before there's a vote so that the American people can see how their money is being spent." That might help some but not much. Voters in the lawmaker's district or state might not object to getting earmarked for goodies.

As one who has studied the military-industrial-political-intelligence complex for almost 50 years now from the front row seat a defense reporter gets, I think the deficit, unemployment, cost overruns on weapons that don't work and/or have nothing to do with winning the war against terrorists - along with voter disgust with Washington's spending binge - will eventually force the president and Congress to rein in their spending on dubious weapons.

The overseers will realize that real national security means fixing the national economy, not letting the Defense secretary and Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps continue to drive the taxpayers to the poor house in Cadillacs.

As one who spent seven and a half months on an aircraft carrier, let me fuel the eventual battle of the Pentagon budget by asking right here and now whether it makes sense in these economic times to build all three of the new carriers of the class named after the late President Gerald R. Ford.

In its latest Selected Acquisition Report, the Pentagon projects that three of these Ford class carriers will cost a total of $35 billion, or almost $12 billion each. A pilot who really knows carriers from taking off and landing on them thousands of times told me that the bad guys could disable the carrier flight deck with comparatively cheap missiles or do what our own Navy frogmen have already done: Sneak aboard a carrier at night undetected by climbing up its steel sides on magnetic shoes. "They can make it rain longer than we can swim," the pilot said of those bent on dethroning the queen of the Navy fleet.