Announcing a fiscal year (FY) 2010 defense budget he says is “crafted to reshape the priorities of America’s defense establishment,” Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates called for eliminating the Army’s Future Combat Systems (FCS) armored vehicles program, increasing rotorcraft and special operations capabilities, completing the growth of the Army and caring for the all-volunteer force. Releasing DoD’s request before the White House submits a budget to Congress is unorthodox, but Secretary Gates told reporters that President Obama agreed to the approach because of the scope and significance of the changes.

“This is a reform budget,” said Secretary Gates, “reflecting lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet also addressing the range of other potential threats around the world, now and in the future.”

Although the restructuring of the FCS program was the last of Secretary Gates’ announcements, it loomed large among the program cuts. He recommended the cancellation of the vehicle component and the reevaluation of requirements, technology and approach followed by a relaunch of the Army’s vehicle modernization program, which includes a competitive bidding process. DoD will “retain and accelerate the initial increment of the program to spin out technology enhancements to all combat brigades,” he said, but the vehicle part of the program is currently estimated to cost more than $87 billion, and he is not convinced the lighter armored FCS vehicles are optimal for close-quarters combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Secretary Gates spoke first about troops and families, making it clear that people take top priority in his recommendations. In addition to completing the Army’s end-strength growth, he called for steady growth in medical research and development and proper funding for health care. He also requested increased funding for improvements in child care, spousal support, lodging and education.

Another recommendation particularly affecting the Army is DoD’s proposal to spend $500 million more in the base budget than it did in FY 2009 to field and sustain more helicopters, which are in urgent demand in Afghanistan. The primary limitation on helicopter capacity is shortages of maintenance crews and pilots rather than airframes, Secretary Gates noted. “Virtually all the money, or most of it, is going to go to accelerate the training of helicopter crews and pilots,” he said. In addition, he recommended increasing special operations personnel by more than 2,800, or 5 percent, and buying more lift, mobility and refueling aircraft for Special Forces use.

The growth of Army brigade combat teams, said the Secretary, will stop at 45 rather than 48, with the planned increase in end strength remaining at 547,000. He believes such a measure will thicken the ranks, ensuring that units have enough personnel to deploy, and said that it does not preclude the Army’s resuming the increase in force structure at some later point after stop loss is phased out and dwell time is increased.

Secretary Gates expects criticism of the budget. “Some will say I am too focused on the wars we are in and not enough on future threats,” he acknowledged, but he asserted that “the allocation of dollars in this budget definitely belies that claim.” Secretary Gates noted that about 10 percent would be for irregular warfare; about 50 percent for traditional, strategic and conventional conflict; and about 40 percent for dual-purpose capabilities. “I’m not trying to have irregular capabilities take the place of the conventional capabilities,” he said. “I’m just trying to get the ‘irregular’ guys to have a seat at the table.”

Stop Loss to End. In a news briefing at the Pentagon in March, Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates announced a phased plan to end the unpopular program called stop loss, which involuntarily extends soldiers’ service time in units deploying to combat areas. In addition, soldiers stop-lossed since October 1, 2008, began receiving monthly compensation of $500 in April. The law allowing the implementation of stop loss has not changed, and the Secretary of Defense retains the authority to use the policy
again in future emergency situations.

The Army Reserve will begin mobilizing units without
employing stop loss in August; the Army National Guard
will start in September. Active duty Army will deploy its
first unit without using stop loss by January 2010.

Currently, some 13,000 soldiers are serving under stop-
loss orders. About 7,300 of them are active duty soldiers,
more than 4,400 are in the Army National Guard and ap-
proximately 1,450 are in the Army Reserve. Secretary Gates
said the goal is to halve the number of soldiers serving un-
der stop loss by June 2010 and reduce it to near zero by
March 2011. The reduction of troops in Iraq and the in-
creased size of the Army are among the factors allowing
the Army to end stop loss.

LTG Michael Rochelle, deputy chief of staff for personnel,
G-1, told reporters that eligible soldiers who are no longer
under stop-loss orders will receive a lump sum payment in
May and June. The payments are tax-free for soldiers in the
war zone. They are funded for fiscal year 2009—through
September 30, 2009—and future funding is under discussion.

LTG Rochelle also said the Army will formulate a policy
that offers new incentives to encourage soldiers to stay
with their units for the duration of their deployments.
Those incentives could include monetary awards or the
option of extending service for only the duration of the up-
coming deployment.

Army Addresses Suicides. The suicides of four Army re-
cruiters from the Houston, Texas, recruiting battalion be-
tween January 2005 and September 2008 prompted the
personnel subcommittee of the House Armed Services
Committee to hold a hearing on suicides and suicide-pre-
vention programs throughout the armed forces in March.
GEN Peter W. Chiarelli, Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, tes-
tified before the subcommittee.

Although suicide-prevention programs have expanded
recently, the rate of suicide in the military continues to
mount; 2008 was the fourth straight year of increases. The
Army’s suicide rate has more than doubled since 2004.
GEN Chiarelli testified that in 2008 there were 140 soldier
suicides, a figure that includes seven unconfirmed cases
still under review. The figure, he said, is an all-time high for
the Army, a confirmed rate of about 20 suicides per 100,000
people compared to a national average of 11 per 100,000.

The rising trend in suicides has continued in 2009.

GEN Chiarelli, who was charged with developing a plan
to reduce the number of suicides in the Army, told the sub-
committee that Army efforts are focused on mitigating the
stress that may affect the suicide rate. He reported that an
Army-wide stand-down held in January to address the
problem is being followed by a chain-teaching program be-
ing conducted into June that will allow leaders to commu-
nicate with every soldier.

The Army recognizes, said GEN Chiarelli, that address-
ning the suicide problem will require a team effort across all
Army components as well as cooperation with partners
such as the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Na-
tional Institute of Mental Health. He said the Army is also
working on removing the stigma attached to seeking men-
tal health treatment. Soon after testifying, GEN Chiarelli
traveled to seven installations to gather personal feedback
from soldiers and their families. He is scheduled to present
his findings to DoD in June.

Ambassador to Afghanistan Confirmed. President Ba-
rack Obama nominated and the Senate confirmed LTG Karl W. Eikenberry in April as ambassador to Afghanistan.
LTG Eikenberry will retire from the Army to accept the po-
sition. Since 2007, LTG Eikenberry has served as the
deputy chairman of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization
Military Committee in Brussels, Belgium. He was com-
mander of the Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan
from May 2005 to January 2007. LTG Eikenberry has a
good relationship with Hamid Karzai, the Afghan presi-
dent, and his close ties with European allies could mean
more support to the mission.

LTG Eikenberry was one of the first to warn of a resur-
gent Taliban and the need to keep Afghanistan from re-
gressing into anarchy. Appearing before the House Armed
Services Committee in February 2007, he warned that the
insurgency focused in southern Afghanistan had reconsti-
tuted itself. He championed building the Afghan army and
security forces, and he emphasized that “al Qaeda and Tal-
iban leadership presence inside Pakistan remains a very
significant problem” that must be satisfactorily addressed
if we are to prevail in Afghanistan.

A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, LTG Eiken-
berry holds master’s degrees in East Asian studies from
Harvard University and in political science from Stanford
University. His operational posts include service as com-
mander and staff officer with mechanized, light, airborne
and Ranger infantry units; he has also served in various
strategy, policy and political-military missions.

LTG Eikenberry will replace career diplomat William B.
Wood, who has served in Kabul since April 2007, joining
Commanding General of Central Command GEN David
H. Petraeus and Commander of U.S. Forces Afghanistan
GEN David D. McKiernan as one of the administration’s
most influential voices on Afghanistan policy.

WRAMC Celebrates 100 Years. On April 27, Walter Reed
Army Medical Center kicked off a weeklong celebration in
honor of the medical center’s century of care for U.S. ser-
vicemembers and their families. Beginning with a volun-
teer agency appreciation ceremony, the events included a
history symposium chronicling key events in the 100-year
service of the medical center and a centennial ball honor-
ing past Walter Reed commanders, physicians and nurses.
The largest DoD military hospital, the medical center is
named in honor of MAJ Walter Reed, an Army physician
who, in 1900, led the team in Cuba that confirmed that yel-
low fever is transmitted by mosquitoes rather than
through direct contact. The 80-bed Walter Reed General
Hospital opened in 1909.