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**Gates cuts FCS Programs, 3 Brigade Combat Teams.** Defense Secretary Robert Gates has recommended eliminating the eight-vehicle component of the Future Combat Systems program because they “do not reflect the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan,” and cutting from 48 to 45 Army brigade combat teams.

He made the announcements April 6 at a Pentagon press conference before the formal submission of the budget to Congress and only days after the defense comptroller received his and the senior military leaders’ recommendations on a host of defense programs.

Earlier, the department said that it would be asking for \$533.7 billion for the base defense budget for Fiscal Year 2010.

“This is a reform budget,” he said in answer to a question, and one that would give irregular warfare programs “a seat at the table.”

As an example of this, he said \$2 billion more will be spent on intelligence and surveillance in Afghanistan.

Gates called the \$87 billion vehicle program expensive and he was troubled by the contract for them. “We must get the program right even if it means delay.”

He said the recommendation to cut three brigade combat teams would reduce the “cross-leveling” of soldiers from one unit to a deploying unit to meet manpower and readiness requirements. “The Army has trouble filling some of the units they deploy. ... Let’s stop at 45 and thicken the ranks” and, at a later date, re-look force structure.

Also included in the recommendations was to add \$500 million to step up training for Army rotorcraft pilots and maintainers.

The recommendations also move the growth of end strength in the Army and Marine Corps to the base budget and ends further personnel cuts in the Air Force and Navy.

He put that cost at \$11 billion, and also noted the department planned to spend \$47 billion on health care in the coming fiscal year. “If approved, these recommendations will profoundly reform how this department does business,” Gates said.

**Petraeus voices concern over Pakistani government collapse.** U.S. Central Command’s senior officer told the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee: “Pakistani state failure would provide transnational terrorist groups and other extremist organizations an opportunity to acquire nuclear weapons and a safe haven from which to plan and launch attacks.”

Testifying April 23, Gen. David Petraeus said in prepared testimony, “The Pakistani state faces a rising—indeed, an existential—threat from extremists such as al Qaeda and other transnational terrorist organizations, which have developed safe havens and support bases in ungoverned spaces in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions. Nevertheless, many Pakistani leaders remain focused on India as Pakistan’s principal threat.”

In Pakistan, Taliban forces moved almost unopposed from the Swat Valley to within 60 miles of the capital Islamabad in a matter of days.

Before leaving for a trip to Iraq in late April, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton told the House Foreign Affairs Committee the insurgent advances from the loosely controlled northwestern frontier to the Swat Valley and now even closer to the capital posed an “existential threat” to Pakistan.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates, speaking to reporters at Camp Lejeune, N.C., used similar language. “My hope is that there will be an increasing recognition on the part of the Pakistani government that the Taliban in Pakistan are in fact an existential threat to the democratic government of that country. I think that some of the leaders certainly understand that, but it is important that they not only recognize it but take the appropriate actions to deal with it.”

All three linked a secure Pakistan with a secure Afghanistan, a nation about to receive an additional 17,000 American and allied service members and specialized police from NATO.

“Although ... additional resources will be applied in different ways on either side of the [border between Afghanistan and Pakistan], Afghanistan and Pakistan comprise a single theater that require comprehensive, whole-of-governments approaches that are closely coordinated,” Petraeus told lawmakers.

**\$83.4 billion sought for Afghanistan and Iraq, increased border security.** The administration is calling on Congress to pass an \$83.4 billion emergency spending bill by Memorial Day to continue to pay for military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, increased security along the United States-Mexican border and stepped up diplomatic and economic efforts in Pakistan.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said that without the funding, the U.S. would be forced to make sudden withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan.

“And I don’t know anybody who thinks that’s a good idea,” he said.

The \$83.4-billion request includes \$75.8 billion for military operations.

An additional \$7.1 billion will go to diplomatic efforts and foreign aid, including \$1.6 billion for Afghanistan, \$1.4 billion for Pakistan and \$700 million for Iraq.

“This will be the last supplemental for Iraq and Afghanistan. The process by which this has been funded over the past—the course of the past many years the president has discussed and will change, and this will be the last time,” Robert Gibbs, White House press secretary, said April 9.

“The honest budgeting and appropriations process that the president has talked about falls somewhat victim to the fact that this is the way that wars have been funded previously,” Gibbs added. “So we can’t wait until the appropriations process is done in ... August or September to fund operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in June.”

In a letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, President Barack Obama said, “We must break that recent tradition and include future military costs in the regular budget so that we have an honest, more accurate and fiscally responsible estimate of federal spending.”

In addition to providing \$600 million for four more F-22 fighters, the supplemental includes \$8.8 billion to replace equipment damaged or lost during combat, including a range of new attack and transport helicopters.

The Pentagon is also seeking \$3.8 billion for military intelligence, including equipment for counter-terrorism teams and additional airborne surveillance.

**Weight of gear concerns Senate panel.** What the Army was doing to reduce the weight of a soldier’s gear operating at the high altitudes of Afghanistan was again a concern of a key congressional subcommittee April 22.

Gen. Peter Chiarelli, Army vice chief of staff, said the Rapid Equipping Force “has been absolutely critical” in reducing weight by 13 to 23 pounds depending on what the soldier’s position was in the squad.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Readiness and Management Support Subcommittee, the vice chief cited the lighter machine guns and armored plate carriers as key components in reducing the weight a soldier carries. “The machine guns have already gone down range.” He added the Army is also looking at lighter boots.

“Our job is to put out what the risk factor is” in using lighter equipment to commanders who will be using the gear as they deploy to Afghanistan.

Looking further down the road, as supplemental spending bills become a part of the past, “We’ve got to find a place for REF in the base budget.” He added that the Army also has to find a place in the base budget to pay for resetting equipment, a process that will take three to four years after combat operations wear down.

He said the administration’s request for \$83.4 billion in supplemental spending, largely to cover operations in Afghanistan and Iraq needs to be passed by July 1. “Supplemental is critical for us for re-set.”

Chiarelli said the Army is looking to field an all-terrain variant of the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles to Afghanistan in November. He told the panel that MRAPs will play a role in operations in Afghanistan despite the rugged terrain.

He said that since MRAPs in some cases are going to units without experience in heavy armored vehicles that contractor support was necessary. Citing the contractors’ work with aviation units and keeping helicopters flying, he said they “did a magnificent job 7 ½ years” maintaining the aircraft.

“We’re making tough choices every day” on personnel, he said. Noting the Army has reached its increased end strength of 547,400 early, there were still about 30,000 soldiers unavailable for deployments because they are in warrior transition units, or being held back because of the effects of repeated deployments or are serving in joint manning positions.

**Administration pushed DoD, VA on electronic records.** President Barack Obama announced plans to have the Departments of Defense and Veterans' Affairs to work closely together in building a single electronic medical record that would follow a service member from enlistment or commissioning throughout life.

Speaking in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building April 9, he said, "When a member of the armed forces separates from the military, he or she will no longer have to walk paperwork from a DoD duty station to a local VA health center. Their electronic records will transition along with them and remain with them forever."

Adding, "It would cut through red tape and reduce the number of administrative mistakes. It would allow all VA sites access to a veteran's complete military medical record, giving them the information they need to deliver high-quality care."

At present, veterans must hand carry their medical records to Veterans Affairs' facilities once they leave active duty service. The Veterans' Affairs system has a backlog of 800,000 disability claims, which means that veterans typically wait six months for decisions on their cases.

Electronic medical records are also part of the administration's health care reform agenda.

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said the House would support the joint venture. "Accurate electronic medical records are essential to reducing costs, helping eliminate medical errors, and providing seamless quality care, which is why investments in health IT are a top priority for the Obama administration and for Congress."

As part of the Executive Office Building announcement, Obama also called for two-year appropriations for the VA.

Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, said in a statement that he welcomed the president's support and has scheduled hearings on the proposal.

The Senate budget resolution contains such a provision, but the House version does not. Differences will be worked out in a conference committee.

"The care that our veterans receive should never be hindered by budget delays," Obama said.

As the president concluded his remarks, the White House released a statement with more details on what the two departments will be doing on health care in the coming fiscal year.

**Shinseki wants to see transition to VA beginning when service member is sworn in.**

The best way to ensure service members transition seamlessly from the Defense Department to the Department of Veterans' Affairs when they leave the military is to start the process at the swearing-in ceremony, Veterans' Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki told American Forces Press Service.

"Seamless transition really has to begin when that service member is still serving, puts on the uniform, raises a right hand and takes the oath of allegiance," Shinseki said, who spent 38 years in uniform before retiring in 2003 as Army chief of staff. "We need to begin the transition then."

Shinseki said he's had several conversations with Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates about ways to continue improving the transition process between the two departments.

One concept, called "uniform registration," would enroll service members automatically in a single Defense-VA management system when they join the military. As envisioned, the system would have two components: one for personnel files and another for medical files.

Shinseki explained the benefits of uniform registration last month during a Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing. "Uniform registration will push both of us, both the VA and the [Defense Department], to create a single, electronic record that would govern how we acknowledge, identify, track and manage each of our clients," he said.

"That way, we could begin to track them throughout the course of their service in uniform—whether it's two years, four years, 10 years, 30 years," he told American Forces Press Service.

"And when the change in their status occurs and they take the uniform off and return to civilian life, the transition has already been done," he continued. "They are already a member of our department, we know who they are, and we have been watching their development."

The initiative, he said, would result in better, faster, more consistent management decisions, with less chance of lost files or destroyed claims and fewer backlogs in processing claims. Service members leaving the military would come to VA as known entities, and their entitlements would be clear, Shinseki said. Meanwhile, VA could better project veterans' needs.

Shinseki told the Senate committee both the VA and the Defense Department "are in agreement about the goodness of such a system and have people working toward making this a reality."

**Emphasis shifts in NCO education.** The emphasis is shifting in what noncommissioned officers are expected to take from their education system—not what to think but how, Command Sgt. Maj. Ray Chandler of the Sergeants Major Academy said.

“We want them to be critical and creative thinkers, resource manager, understand leader development and see themselves as warrior leaders,” and “as professionals, we are encouraging structured self-development, truly lifelong learning,” he said.

Adding, “There has to be a personal responsibility for professional self development. I think it’s going to pay big dividends” over time.

That part of the program can run from 40 to 80 hours, Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) officials said.

The academy is responsible for the Warrior Leader Course, the common core of the other stages of NCO education and the academy itself.

“The branches are responsible for what is needed at the Advanced Leader Course and the Senior Leader Course, the renamed and repositioned Basic Noncommissioned Officer and Advanced Noncommissioned Officer courses.”

He said, “We had to balance risk” in looking at course lengths. For the most part, they are now eight weeks long, but there are exceptions with the approval of the commanding general of the Training and Doctrine Command.

For example, Infantry Advanced Noncommissioned Officers Course had been three months; it is now seven weeks. “How much time is enough time?”

Command Sgt. Maj. John Sparks, USA, Ret., a special assistant to the TRADOC commander, said this shortened course length also meets the chief of staff’s goal of having soldiers not in a training situation during the first six months following a deployment. “It allows them time to re-integrate with their families.”

Although the Army Force Generation Model calls for soldiers on active duty to spend one year deployed or prepared for deployment and two years in garrison with time for NCOES, the reality is soldiers are spending 15 months to a year deployed and only slightly more than a year in garrison.

“The mobile training teams can help there by taking the courses to them,” Chandler said.

At the Noncommissioned Officer Academy, Fort Benning, Ga., Command Sgt. Maj. Zoltan James said that the changes in the education system from basic through officer are to be complete this year.

## **Control of JCA upsets House panel members.**

The Air Force’s executive control of the Joint Cargo Aircraft program left members of the House Armed Services Air/Land Subcommittee upset following an open hearing on Army aviation April 23. “It was a program they didn’t want,” Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii, the panel chairman, and others said.

“Secretary [Robert] Gates did not address the Joint Cargo Aircraft in his April 6 press conference [on the defense budget], but it seems common knowledge that there are major changes planned in the fiscal year 2010 budget request,” Abercrombie said in his opening statement.

But because they had signed agreements not to comment on the budget until it is released in detail, neither Brig. Gen. Walter Davis, director of Army aviation or Brig. Gen. William Crosby, program executive officer for aviation, could speak directly to the question.

The Army previously had been designated executive agent for the program to replace the fixed wing C-23 Sherpa, now operating in Iraq but not Afghanistan. “It’s an old, slow aircraft,” Davis said.

Because of the size of Afghanistan and its mountainous terrain, subcommittee members wanted to know if the CH-47F program was on schedule. Crosby said it was but “it’s not a fast process.” In addition to the 23 Chinooks lost in Afghanistan, to upgrade one means pulling it from service in theater. “It is the one aircraft that can operate at those altitudes because of the tandem rotors.”

Davis said the Army is “taking a hard look” at the CH-47F program to make sure it is structured properly and will have the right number of aircraft available when the upgrade process is completed.

The \$500 million that Gates mentioned during the April 6 press conference as being set aside for training 300 more Army pilots and maintainers will be going into infrastructure, operations and maintenance and additional AH-64 Apaches and UH-60 Black Hawks for Fort Rucker, Ala., Davis said.

“Rucker was working on this even before” the April 6 press conference and the secretary’s visit to the installation, Davis said. Crosby added, “We’re looking for ways to streamline the process” of completing military construction projects in less than the current five year average for them.

While the Army and the other services are expanding the roles Unmanned Aerial Systems play in combat, Federal Aviation Administration regulations restrict their use in air space it controls. “It’s unknown territory. We’re learning as we go” as to what the services can do, where, Crosby said.