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Gates calls for harsher scrutiny of defense budget. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, saying “I want change. But I am not crazy,” told reporters May 20 that he would not oppose a military pay increase of 1.9 percent for Fiscal Year 2011 but reaffirmed the administration’s opposition to having a second manufacturer provide engines for the Joint Strike Fighter.

The administration called for a 1.4 percent pay raise for military and civilian employees. In his testimony on the request in February, Gates estimated the additional cost to be \$500 million a year. The House Armed Services Committee included the larger pay raise in its mark-up of the defense authorization bill.

“This is about belt tightening, making tough choices and essentially refocusing available resources, not about cutting the overall defense top line, now or in the future,” he said in an opening statement. Adding, “Similarly, while we will continue to take a hard look at all aspects of the department’s budget, the focus of this effort is on overhead costs and business operations, not core military functions such as force structure, uniformed personnel or future combat capabilities.”

During hearings on the budget request, he told House and Senate committees that he would recommend the president veto any defense bill that called for two manufacturers of engines for the strike fighter.

On cutting bureaucratic overhead, he repeated his call in a speech at the Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kan., earlier in May to review both senior uniformed and senior civilian positions to see which positions could be downgraded or eliminated. “Some of our combatant commanders are already looking at whether they can make some reductions in that area. We will proceed with care.”

In the speech, bluntly said, “Given America’s difficult economic circumstances and parlous fiscal condition, military spending on things large and small can and should expect closer, harsher scrutiny. The gusher has been turned off, and will stay off for a good period of time.”

He added, “The fact that we are a nation at war and facing an uncertain world, I believe, calls for sustaining the current military force structure—Army brigades, Marine regiments, Air Force wings, Navy ships.”

Army’s modernization strategy stresses interoperability and affordability. The Army’s G-8 rolled out the service’s modernization strategy, emphasizing both affordability and interoperability as key drivers, at the April Association of the United States Army’s Institute of Land Warfare breakfast April 29.

Speaking in suburban Washington April 29, Lt. Gen. Robert Lennox said in devising the strategy the Army was building on the Quadrennial Defense Review’s admonition to “winning the wars you are in and preparing for future contingencies.”

It also takes into account that the Army is “not sure what your enemy is going to look like.”

The way the strategy will be implemented is “developing and fielding new capabilities,” he said, built on a strong network able to take critical information down to the dismounted soldier or the company commander on the move, the development of the Ground Combat Vehicle to replace the Bradley fleet and future developments in unmanned aerial vehicles.

“You have to take the network with you,” he said. Later in answer to a question, he added it is more complex than using a Blackberry in the United States with cell phone towers reaching pretty much around the country. “Afghanistan does not have cell phone towers” in those kinds of numbers.

Lennox said, “You have to be able to upgrade” what goes into the systems and they need to be relevant for the next 15 years.

The fielding part of the strategy is consistent with Army priorities of the Army Force Generation Model and ensuring that [units] are equipped for that specific mission,” be it homeland security or high-end combat.” Lennox said this is “not tiered readiness.”

Stressing affordability, Lennox said the Army’s portfolio review of programs are determining the currency and relevancy of programs and are also looking at new requirements on the near horizon.

At the same time, the Army is reviewing quarterly the items fielded through the Rapid Equipping Force to determine what will move into the program of record, what are niche technologies that can be warehoused and what technologies are no longer current or relevant.

McKinley calls reserve components a ‘shock absorber.’ “These mobilizations are streamlined so much now that they can give combatant commanders 12 months boots on the ground,” the chief of the National Guard Bureau told attendees at a Joint Warfighting Conference in Virginia Beach, Va.

Gen. Craig McKinley, USAF, said the reserve components have “been a shock absorber,” particularly for the Army in being able to sustain military operations for more than eight years with an All-Volunteer Force. Guardsmen also are taking on missions such as Kosovo and the Horn of Africa to allow active duty soldiers to be available for other assignments.

He said the Army National Guard could maintain the Army Force Generation Model of 55,000 to 60,000 indefinitely if there is predictability in deployments that employers and families can depend on. “I think that’s significant contribution.” Adding, “I see no end in sight for continuing deployments.”

Citing Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who noted that “the fragile state of the economy is posing the greatest security to the United States,” McKinley said most governors have continued to support the National Guard for state missions “to help them through crises” from Oklahoma tornadoes, floods in Nashville and possible deployment to the Gulf Coast for oil spill clean-up.

McKinley said in his May 13 speech that defense spending will be coming down soon. “When we start turning the spigot off [in the words of Defense Secretary Robert Gates], it can be gut-wrenching. We’re going to have to make difficult choices,” particularly in regard to legacy systems.

“I do not look forward to some of the decisions we will have to make.”

Among the challenges will be maintaining the National Guard as a full-spectrum force. “We have paid in blood and treasure” to become that kind of force, capable of deploying overseas and prepared for a catastrophic event beyond a major natural disaster.

In answer to a question, McKinley said that communications in the armed forces in theater was effective and allowed quick response to changing situations and the sharing of intelligence. “The weakness is here at home. We can’t push intelligence and information to our TAGs (adjutants general) because of firewalls.” Likewise, similar barriers exist in trying to share data with federal agencies, such as the FBI.

McKinley said that included ensuring that the National Guard “can carry out its homeland security missions” by working in tandem with Northern Command “to ensure we do the right thing at the right time.”

Army Strong Community Service Centers provide valuable link for military, civilian communities. The wife of the chief of the Army Reserve sees the “virtual installations,” like the one being formally dedicated in mid-May in Brevard, N.C., as “a meeting place between the military and the community.”

The centers “are not just for Army Reserve soldiers’ families but for Gold Star mothers, families of active duty soldiers and guardsmen and soldiers back home wounded in the war,” Laura Stultz said. “They also give a chance to the community to volunteer and for businesses to tell others about discounts or special services.”

The plan now is to have four pilot centers in metropolitan areas and four in rural areas. The first center opened in Rochester, N.Y.; Brevard is the second.

A native North Carolinian, she said that there are 1,200 Army Reserve soldiers within 50 miles of the center in addition to National Guard soldiers, airmen and their families and families of active duty soldiers who have deployed.

When her husband, now Lt. Gen. Jack Stultz, deployed for the first Gulf War, she said, “I felt alone” and felt others had the same feeling. Being an Army Reserve spouse for 35 years, she wanted to help other families through those deployments. “What can we do to help them? Most are not near [Army Community Services] on an installation.”

Laura Stultz said the difference between her situation with four children at home and now is that even more spouses are working. “That makes a difference” in the time they have available to get to an installation. Also now, many Army Reserve soldiers are not assigned even to units in driving distance to their homes.

“We lived in the same home in Florida for 18 years” and when “he was traveling [for Proctor & Gamble], he was never gone for more than two weeks.” During the Gulf War, “I had to wear two hats,” and she saw the impact of the deployment and return home on her children.

“These Army Strong Community Centers [the official title for the virtual installations] are the link they need to get services. They don’t know how to go about using an installation and who to see.”

Laura Stultz recalled her first time going to Fort Campbell, Ky., shortly after she was married. “It was intimidating,” and most reserve component families were like her then—no experience with an active duty installation. They unlike her then had an immediate need—where to go when they have a TRICARE question.

Closing networks key to success in IED fight.

Planting his prosthetic lower leg on the table Maj. Bruce Gannaway said, “We need to find a way to stop the flow of money” to the networks who are placing improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan and Iraq.

He was picking up on a theme of Lt. Gen. Michael Oates, director of the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization, in giving field commanders greater flexibility in sharing tactical information with allies to counter the weapons that are causing the greatest number of casualties and deaths in military operations in the two countries.

Both were speaking May 11 at a Joint Warfighting Conference in Virginia Beach, Va.

Oates said taking down the networks was critical, but was “inhibited by law and regulation and, in some cases, risk-adverse commanders. You can’t defeat a network until you understand it.”

Taking down the networks that quickly adapt to changed circumstances involves both lethal targeting and benign information operation. He called for a review of the law and regulation classifying this information and declassifying it.

“Information must be shared with the right people in a timely manner. The further we get from the battlefield, the more we become risk-adverse,” he added. “We disable ourselves by an inability to share information,” especially at the tactical level.

Maj. Dino Mora of the Italian Army and a veteran of the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq, added, “The sharing of information is a big challenge in NATO,” even “when working together in the same place.”

Adding, “There’s always the need to get our own information,” and that “is not the right way to do it.”

“Training is where we get our highest payoff” in countering IEDs. “We have got to integrate the IED in every training exercise.” Oates said the training needed to be standardized and should employ more simulation. “I have been overwhelmed” with what he has seen in simulation training to counter IEDs.

He wants to change a situation where “many of the tactical units learn by doing. In my opinion, they should come to the battle with it.”

“We’ve got to develop a battle staff that knows how to use [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance] for hunting” down the networks. “There is no shortage of data. There is a dearth of analysis.”

Petraeus: Why not share information? The commanding general of U.S. Central Command said the United States should be asking itself the question “why isn’t information being shared with allies,” rather than barring them from intelligence that could benefit all.

Speaking by video-teleconference with a Joint Warfighting Conference in Virginia Beach, Gen. David Petraeus said, “You would literally change the process.” Among the challenges would be to “have some degree of confidence in who we share” information with.

At the same time, he said there were 18 different intelligence systems operating in Afghanistan making integration difficult.

He added that civilian-military operation centers in Afghanistan and Iraq have been available to non-governmental organizations (NGO) to share information with them. “We have to understand the culture of NGOs. Not every NGO wants to have a relationship with us.”

Petraeus said that contractors allowed him to put more forces outside the wire in the Iraq surge. Many of them were host nation nationals and were doing housekeeping chores—basic maintenance, cooking, etc.

The addition of contracting specialists in the services and Department of Defense civilians is helping curtail abuses in acquisition and logistics in the command.

Italians had to shift focus when first in Iraq.

An Italian Army intelligence officer who served in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq said what was the biggest challenges for his country’s armed forces initially in Iraq was “We were preparing to be friends of the people and on the other side we were not realizing we could be shot.”

Maj. Dino Mora was one of four junior officers sharing their experiences with several thousand attendees at a Joint Warfighting Conference in Virginia Beach, Va.

Capt. Kirby Warm, USMC, said during his tour in Afghanistan as an embedded trainer, “We were generally on foot” and “this allowed us to intermingle with the people in the south.”

As an intelligence officer, he found this invaluable, but there were obstacles that had to be overcome. “The toughest thing was to get [the Afghans] to train, to get them to work.” Adding, “The guys that had the most success on my teams had charisma” and “they kept it.”

Unlike areas around Kandahar and Helmand, relatively flat, “we saw few IEDs,” even though his unit was supplied by paved roads.

SMA tells Hill dwell time is top soldier, family concern. The Army's top enlisted soldier said the number one question soldiers ask is: When will they get more dwell time between deployments?

Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth Preston said, "The one concern or worry that keeps me awake at night is stress on the force. Stress on the force comes in many different forms across all three components of the Army."

Short dwell times contribute to the stress among soldiers, their families and their children.

Testifying April 15 before the House Appropriations Military Construction Subcommittee, he added, "Indicators of stress on the force can be seen in the increase of suicide rates again this past year, post-traumatic stress is also high, and we've watched divorces tick up a little."

Speaking specifically about suicides, Preston told the panel the steps the Army has taken to aid in prevention and broader programs addressing a host of quality-of-life and behavioral health concerns.

"After January, February '09 we implemented ... a stand-down day, a chain teach, and then into a number of interactive video," particularly the shoulder-to-shoulder video.

The latter was an interactive video based on real-life scenarios "to teach first-line supervisors, leaders at the lowest levels, the indicators of suicide [and] how you deal with those challenges and how you seek help."

At the Association of the United States Army's Annual Meeting and Exposition in October, Gen. George W. Casey Jr., Army chief of staff, unveiled the service's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program that addresses many behavioral health issues, Preston said.

He added there are four pillars to the program—a general assessment test for soldiers, family members and Department of the Army civilians; comprehensive self-help modules; the development of master resilience trainers first through the University of Pennsylvania and now at Fort Jackson, S.C.; and taking what is being taught in that course through the entire Army schoolhouse—from basic training to the war college.

He said the goal is to have one master resilience trainer in each Army battalion.

At the same hearing Mary Keller, executive director of the Military Child Education Coalition, said her organization is working to answer the most basic question: What schools do military kids attend as part of answering the larger question of measuring their success in higher education and performance in the school they are now attending?

Chairman speaks to civilians about service members' lives, veterans' needs. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff began an extraordinary series of appearances, town hall meetings, question-and-answer sessions and speeches across the country to explain to the American public the efforts the nation is calling on its service members, their families and veterans to make as the United States continues its military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Adm. Michael Mullen, speaking at West Virginia University recently, said, "I've seen us basically transition our people from active duty to the VA and back to communities throughout the country and do so in a way that essentially really lets them go."

"And at a time where so many have given so much—we've got families of the fallen who have sacrificed, who have paid the ultimate sacrifice; those tens and hundreds of thousands who have been wounded and those that, again, have made such a difference and gone out and done what the country asks—having three different systems just isn't adequate anymore."

Adding, "So more than anything else what I hope to do is just ignite a discussion that connects community leadership with the needs of these families. And I want to emphasize families. It's individuals who've served but also families. We see great stress that spouses are currently impacted by in ways that we hadn't imagined because of the numbers of deployments—the repetition of deployments. We see it in the children as well."

Since West Virginia has no major active duty military installation in the state, he addressed his particular concerns about returning guardsmen and reservists.

"We still struggle, while we do it in a much better way than we did in the past—and I call it reintegration—we still struggle with too rapid of a reintegration. We still—particularly in the guard and reserve where individuals have gone into combat—seen things that they never imagined they would see and they come back and they are back in the neighborhood, back in the job and they're the only one that has any understanding of what they've been through," he said.

At the same time, Mullen also said even with communities, its institutions and the state wanting to help knowing who is a veteran and where they are living remains a challenge.

"One of the real struggles that we have is knowing who's here. How do I know that someone who has served has come back home ... but throughout the state, how does the state of West Virginia know who is here? And those could be West Virginia citizens, much less those that come here for whatever reason and decide to take up citizenship and who have served," he noted.