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Bush Defense Plan Questioned

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- In defending the Bush administration's 2002 military budget, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld encountered lawmakers skeptical of its affordability and puzzled by its lack of support for the big-dollar modernization efforts President Bush has been promising.

Lawmakers also criticized Rumsfeld for blindsiding them with some of his proposed cuts -- in B-1B bombers flown by Air National Guard units, in Peacekeeper nuclear missiles and in military bases.

``I am discouraged, I am frustrated, I am angry," Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., told Rumsfeld in a rising voice. His complaint: The Pentagon did not consult with the congressional delegations from Kansas or Georgia before deciding to scrap B-1B bomber units at bases in their states. Rumsfeld apologized.

To rebut the Pentagon's claim that the B-1B decision was not driven by politics, Roberts waved at Rumsfeld an internal Air Force document on ``political impacts" of the decision on Texas and South Dakota, where B-1B bomber bases are least affected by the cutbacks. It noted that Texas is the home state of ``POTUS," (President of the United States), and South Dakota is the home state of Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, a Democrat.

Rumsfeld testified before the House and Senate armed services committees Thursday on the administration's proposed $328.9 billion Pentagon budget for the fiscal year starting Oct. 1. It represents a $32.6 billion increase over this year's budget and is $18.4 billion more than Bush had proposed in February.

Rumsfeld told the committee that the extra billions for the 2002 budget will go almost entirely to fixing problems of the past rather than investing in a military of the future.

``We cannot build a 21st century force quite yet," Rumsfeld said, ``because the 20th century force we have is in serious need of repair."

That statement captured the essence of a dilemma the Bush administration faces at the Pentagon.

Bush campaigned on a promise to transform the military to meet new threats like computer warfare and longer-range ballistic missiles. Yet after achieving his top-priority $1.35 billion tax cut, Bush has left Rumsfeld far short of the billions he needs to fulfill the president's promise.

``Let's be clear that this increase, while significant -- and we certainly need every cent

of it -- does not get us well," Rumsfeld told senators. He said the Pentagon would need another $18 billion budget increase in 2003 just to stay even, and that still would not be enough to advance the promised modernization effort.

Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., the Senate committee chairman, told Rumsfeld he believes the administration will be unable to afford a serious military modernization effort without dipping into the Medicare surplus, returning the federal budget to red ink or cutting domestic programs -- ``none of which are acceptable alternatives."

``The bottom line is this: The administration strategy of first laying out a banquet of tax cuts leaves other programs, including our national security programs, in an

Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., said he thought the $18.4 billion increase was too little. He asked Rumsfeld whether it was true that in negotiations with the White House he had not gotten all he wanted for defense.

``Seldom do," Rumsfeld replied.

While acknowledging the difficulty of gaining congressional approval for another round of base closures, Rumsfeld said he saw no alternative. He noted that many of the House committee members who questioned him Thursday had their own ideas on ways of spending more on the military.

``Where is it going to come from?" he asked rhetorically. ``Together we're going to have to find ways to save money. There are too many urgent things that need money."

Gen. Henry H. Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said studies have estimated the Pentagon can save $3 billion a year by bringing its base structure more in line with its force structure.

Rumsfeld said he would send Congress a base-closing proposal by the end of the year.

Rep. Joel Hefley, R-Colo., said the process used to determine which bases should be closed during the 1990s was corrupted by the Clinton administration and caused unnecessary turmoil across the nation.

``I have serious concern about us going through that, putting every community in America that has any kind of a military installation into an absolute froth of anxiety," Hefley said.

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