

EMERGENCY? WHAT EMERGENCY?

Winslow Wheeler

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On Feb. 14, President Bush submitted to Congress a \$74.9 billion emergency supplemental appropriations request for the Global War on Terror. The appeal is not for the new 2006 budget; it is for the fiscal year that is already five months old, 2005. It needs urgent action, but it is anything but an emergency.

That term has a specific technical meaning: appropriations that a president and Congress deem emergency are not counted against spending ceilings for annual appropriations. With emergency spending - added literally without limit - Congress and the president can pretend they are living within budget constraints.

Because it arrives after the president's regular budget request, this supplemental also confounds calculations of annual defense budget growth. Significant defense spending increases can be made to seem smaller, and whacks - whether deserved or not - at non-defense, domestic spending can occur under a phony shield of government-wide spending restraint.

Moreover, this emergency supplemental is bulging with spending that belongs in the regular budget. Included is an increase in Army and Marine Corps manpower costing \$1.7 billion; it has a spending tail that will stretch through the next decade or so, but it is described as temporary.

It also includes expenses for a reorganization of the Army for \$5 billion, a plan that will be continued for the foreseeable future and that has been in the making for years. There's another \$1.4 billion for military base construction in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, Uzbekistan and the United States, for facilities which are virtually indistinguishable from those included in the Pentagon's regular request for annual military construction.

There's another \$5.3 billion for maintenance of equipment worn out in the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, a backlog that has been building up largely unaddressed since the war started. And, there's about \$5.1 billion to replace equipment that has been destroyed or worn out and to modify existing equipment. The fabrication of these items will not begin for months and will not end for years.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld argues these emergency supplementals are an unavoidable mechanism for pay for the war; he says the costs of fighting are unknown and unknowable until our service men and women are actually conducting operations. Not to put too fine a point on it but it is a pretty asinine claim. Under this logic, any weapon system that experiences a cost overrun (that would be about all of them) should receive no appropriations whatsoever until after the ultimate, final cost is known.

The inappropriateness of the overdue, emergency supplemental is pushed beyond dispute by a proposal included in Bush's own 2006 budget submission. Acknowledging past abuse, the Analytical Perspectives volume of the 2006 budget presentation proposes a reform "to preclude funds from being declared an emergency for events that occur on an annual or recurring basis." Further, "military operations. . . with costs that are incurred regularly should be part of base funding and, as such, are not considered under this definition." Emergency spending is to be restricted to any "necessary expenditure that is sudden, urgent, unforeseen, and not permanent."

The \$74.9 billion emergency supplemental flunks on all counts, with the exception of urgent. But it is urgent only

because Bush has waited until now to support operations in the ongoing fiscal year. Under duress, he did seek, and Congress approved, \$24.9 billion last August to pay for initial operations. That money is about tapped out and will be well gone when Congress gets around to passing the supplemental, if the military services are lucky, by the end of this month.

Bush has been paying for the war in this manner ever since he decided to invade Iraq. In 2003, he did not ask for a single penny to pay for the war until after the shooting began in March. Overdue, urgent requests make it easy to stampee a skittish Congress and to stuff the already substantial defense budget with more spending that gets a free ride by being associated with supporting the troops.

If past is prologue, Congress will do nothing about any of this. The 2005 supplemental will be passed with the spending that belongs in the regular budget, and every penny will be deemed emergency. The 2006 budget will continue to contain not one nickel to pay for war operations, and some time later this year, Bush and Rumsfeld will ignore their own reform proposal and rush up to the Hill with another emergency supplemental, pleading urgency and demanding compliance -which will be given.

Then, as now, there will be a few in Congress who complain, but their efforts will be both feeble and ignored.

Winslow Wheeler is a former defense staffer to both Democratic and Republican senators, and is a member of the Security Policy Working Group. This article was originally distributed by UPI on March 4, 2005 and is reprinted with the author's permission.

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