

Congress Battles Over Manufacturing Contracts For Military

Andrew Taylor, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — While ceding some ground to President Obama on high-profile weapons cuts, lawmakers are cutting money for training and spare parts to pay for other weapons Obama doesn't want and their own pet projects.

The push-and-pull is playing out within a massive, \$626 billion funding bill for the Pentagon that is being debated on the Senate floor. All told, the bill denies Obama about \$4 billion he sought for operations and maintenance accounts while providing \$2.5 billion for C-17 cargo jets and \$2.7 billion worth of pet projects sought by lawmakers.

On Tuesday, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., launched a withering but probably futile assault on the decision by the Senate Appropriations Committee, led by Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, to add 10 unrequested C-17s to the U.S. fleet of the planes, raising its size to 223. McCain and the Pentagon say the Air Force already has plenty.

A vote on a bid by McCain to kill the additional C-17s is likely on Wednesday.

Critics say curbs to operations and maintenance accounts mean less money is available for fuel, spare parts, training and military exercises or to repair and replace equipment damaged in arduous conditions overseas. Cuts affect the readiness of U.S. troops.

"The (operations and maintenance) account is the operational lifeblood of our military forces," said Winslow Wheeler of the Center for Defense Information think tank. "Without it, the planes don't fly, the troops don't train, and the forces can't fight."

McCain has offered an amendment to the measure to cut out the 10 C-17s, but he faces uphill odds in a chamber filled with senators eager to preserve jobs in their states.

"What we would do in this bill is effectively fund the purchase of new aircraft that we neither need nor can afford with critical sustainment money," he said. "That would have a significant impact on our ability to provide the day-to-day operational funding that our servicemen and women and their families deserve."

Supporters of the C-17, which is assembled in Long Beach, Calif., though its parts are made across the country, have an overwhelming edge and are virtually certain to defeat McCain's amendment to cut the planes from the bill. And they say that unlike the much-criticized F-22 fighter, the C-17 is being used in ongoing military

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operations.

"The C-17 is a proven, combat-tested airlift capability that is essential to the fight we are in right now and has been a workhorse in Iraq and Afghanistan," said Sen. Kit Bond, R-Mo. "With the war in Afghanistan heating up and the war in Iraq continuing, our airlift needs are only growing."

Bond is also a key supporter of using \$512 million in war funds to purchase nine unrequested F-18/A Navy fighters at the same time \$655 million is being cut from an operations and maintenance accounts for request for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. They would be assembled in St. Louis.

Obama is on course to prevail in a battle to cease production of the ultramodern F-22 fighter jet and the VH-71 presidential helicopter, both of which are way over budget. But it took explicit veto threats to keep those out of the Senate measure.

Obama wasn't willing to threaten a veto over the C-17, however, which lawmakers appear to have read as a green light to provide for the planes.

Obama and McCain, rivals in last year's race for the White House, are both critics of pet projects, or earmarks. McCain, however, is a far more strident critic of the Senate's pork-barrel ways. On Tuesday, McCain said Obama has not be stern enough in his dealings with Congress on earmarks. An early White House request to strip earmarks from an omnibus spending bill for the current year was firmly rebuffed by Democratic leaders.

"One thing I know about egregious practices, if you don't stop them early in an administration, you never will," McCain said.

At a Veterans of Foreign Wars meeting in Phoenix in August, Obama promised to fight "the special interests and their exotic projects that are years behind schedule and billions over budget," such as the F-22 fighter, an alternative engine for the F-35 joint strike fighter, and the presidential helicopter.

"If Congress sends me a defense bill loaded with this kind of waste, I will veto it," Obama promised.

But Obama has had far less luck in his promise to get Congress to cut the number of home-state pet projects in appropriations bills like the defense measure. The pending legislation discloses 778 earmarks totaling \$2.7 billion.

However, the C-17 money doesn't count as an earmark, nor does money for the F-18/A fighter or a new \$1.7 billion DDG-51 destroyer to be built in Pascagoula, Miss., home to Republican Sen. Thad Cochran, a top member of the Appropriations Committee and its defense subcommittee.

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