

Bush Won't Ban Permanent Bases : Pushes For Iraqi Oil Law

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SAN FRANCISCO, Jan 29 (IPS) - President George W. Bush signed a 696-billion-dollar Pentagon spending bill immediately before his State of the Union address Monday night, which funds all Defence Department programmes not directly tied to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, expands health care for injured veterans and gives U.S. soldiers a pay raise.

The bill is a mixed bag for peace activists, since Bush added a so-called "signing statement" saying he would ignore provisions that ban permanent military bases in Iraq and forbid the use of U.S. troops to exercise United States control of Iraq's oil resources.

Congress tucked many contentious policies into the spending bill, knowing President Bush would have to sign it to keep the military from grinding to a halt. Among them is a Wounded Warrior bill designed to improve the quality of medical care for U.S. veterans.

Washington's answer to the scandal surrounding poor care at the Walter Reed Army Medical Centre, it was championed by politicians and presidential hopefuls across the political spectrum from Democrat Barack Obama to Republican John McCain.

"This is a tremendous victory for veterans, so that we do not leave any more behind to fall through the cracks," said Paul Sullivan, director of the group Veterans for Common Sense.

The Pentagon reports more than 68,000 U.S. soldiers have been wounded, injured, or stricken ill in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals and clinics have treated over 260,000 patients from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

On top of that, the VA has reported nearly 250,000 disability claims from veterans of the two wars. Studies show as many as half of the 1.6 million soldiers sent to fight in Iraq will return with post-traumatic stress disorder and a fifth are returning with traumatic brain injury, physical brain damage often caused by roadside bombs.

Sullivan says the most important aspect of the legislation President Bush signed Monday is a provision guaranteeing every veteran free VA health care for five years after returning from Iraq or Afghanistan.

"Right now, veterans only receive two years of free health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and due to the long delays at the VA, those two years often expire before the veteran can receive treatment from a doctor," he told IPS.

"In some cases, when a veteran has traumatic brain injury or a psychological condition

related to the war, it may be six months or two or even three years until the condition gets serious enough for the veteran to even want to go to the VA for health care. Now, with this five years of free health care from the VA, our Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans can rest a little more assured that when they show up at the VA they will be treated right away with high quality VA doctors," he said.

President Bush didn't approve the entire bill, though — he used a signing statement to say he wouldn't follow four provisions of the act, which he said "could inhibit the president's ability to carry out his constitutional obligations." Those provisions would have mandated increased Congressional oversight of military contractors, banned construction of permanent military bases in Iraq and forbade the use of U.S. troops to exercise United States control of Iraq's oil resources.

Antonia Juhasz of the group Oil Change International told IPS the issues of oil and permanent military bases are related.

"We've got the Bush administration pushing aggressively for an (Iraqi) law that would give oil companies 20- to 25-year contracts for oil in Iraq and if they were to be at work for an extended length of time, they would need security," she said.

"If the U.S. military is going to stay in Iraq for 20 or 35 years, they're going to need bases," she added.

Juhasz said President Bush's signing statements show the futility of the Democrat's main approach to the war issue — which is to continue approving funds for the war while simultaneously trying to extract concessions from the administration. A Congressional Budget Office report released last week showed the Democratic Congress appropriated more money for the Iraq war in 2007 than Republican Congresses did in years past.

"The bottom line has to be in the willingness to give the money," she said. "The budget for the war this year has reached 170 billion dollars for just the next year. That is an astounding amount of money. The increase in spending on the war is largely caused by the surge and of course the power of the purse is the only power that the Democrats have."

Some observers are looking forward to January 2009, when George Bush's eight years in office will come to an end. But James Paul of the Global Policy Forum says there's plenty the Democrats can do this year to slow or stop the conflict.

"If this is something that counts, then surely they have a pretty strong mandate," he said.

"I suspect there are problems that will go beyond January 2009 and this issue is not going to go away any time soon — even if George Bush is out of office," he added.

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