

US Congress Overwhelmingly Backs \$619 Billion Pentagon Budget

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By an overwhelming 375-34 vote, the US House of Representatives last Friday passed a \$619 billion Pentagon budget that ensures the growth of war and militarism under an incoming Trump administration, while also barring the shutdown of the American prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Early this week, the Senate is expected to easily pass the measure, known as the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which was hammered out in weeks of talks between House and Senate negotiators. The White House has given no indication that President Barack Obama intends to veto the measure, a veto that given the outsized margin of Friday's vote would be easily overridden.

Only 30 Democrats opposed the spending measure, as opposed to 145 supporting it, providing overwhelming bipartisan support for maintaining Washington's infamous and illegal detention facility at Guantanamo.

On his first day in office in 2009, Obama announced an executive order promising that within one year he would close down the prison camp, a symbol of US torture and lawless aggression all over the world. This will be the seventh Pentagon budget in a row that he has signed precluding such a shutdown. The first such restrictions were imposed by a Democratic-controlled Congress, and Obama has obeyed them ever since.

Now he will hand the prison camp over to Donald Trump, who has openly advocated torture and who, during the presidential campaign, vowed to keep the facility open and "load it up with some bad dudes." Also during the campaign, Trump told the *Miami Herald* that he would support sending US citizens to Guantanamo to be tried by military commissions.

The real total spent by the US government on its gigantic military apparatus, including military atomic energy expenditures, veterans' benefits and other costs, is at least \$905 billion, more than 21 percent of the total federal budget.

The legislation passed Friday reversed plans by the Obama administration to slightly pare troop strength, instead barring the Army from falling below 476,000 active-duty soldiers, adding 1,000 and retaining another 15,000 previously slated to be cut. It also adds 8,000 soldiers to the Army National Guard and 4,000 to the Army Reserve, as well as 3,000 Marines and 4,000 Airmen.

In a now routine maneuver, the Congressional leadership evaded spending caps imposed in a 2011 budget-cutting measure known as the sequester by shifting increased appropriations

into an overseas contingency operations (OCO) slush fund of \$59.5 billion, ostensibly “emergency” funding used to pay for the never-ending US wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

In a cynical twist, \$3.2 billion appropriated to pay for pay raises and beefed up troop strength was slotted into the OCO funding in a transparent attempt to portray any objection to the budget-busting measure as a failure to “support our troops.”

Spending on the procurement as well as research and development of weapons systems in the 2017 budget is set at \$184.4 billion.

Among the areas where the 2017 budget expands spending significantly is on the development of the US military’s nuclear war fighting capabilities. This includes an accelerated program for new Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles. While funding for this weapons system was pegged at \$0.4 billion in 2016, it will now be ramped up to \$1.0 billion by fiscal year 2020 and \$1.6 billion by 2021.

Similar increased spending is slated for the development of new long-range nuclear bombers to be built by Northrop Grumman, which is to rise to \$3 billion annually by 2020.

Also funded at slightly over the amount requested by the Obama administration are new Ohio Replacement Program (ORP) ballistic missile submarines. While funding for 2017 was set at \$1.9 billion, the cost of each of these new nuclear weapons systems is expected to approach \$5 billion.

The Republican leadership in the House indicated that it had not been able to increase funding for other weapons systems above levels set by the Obama administration, but anticipates that a new Trump administration will quickly introduce supplementary legislation to further expand the US war machine.

House Armed Services chairman Representative Mac Thornberry has called on Trump to send the Republican-controlled Congress a supplemental defense spending request for fiscal 2017 during his first 100 days in office to pay for additional warplanes, ships and other weaponry that had been originally funded in a House version of the Pentagon bill, but were dropped from the final version negotiated with the Senate because of spending caps.

“I would follow Teddy Roosevelt,” Thornberry told an audience at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank last week. “Speak softly and carry a big stick. We need to make our stick bigger.”

The House vote on the Pentagon budget came just one day after the US Senate voted unanimously to extend for another 10 years the Iran Sanctions Act, which authorizes the president to impose a blockade on Iran’s energy, banking and defense sectors. The White House indicated that Obama will sign the measure into law.

The passage of the legislation provoked heated protests from the Iranian government, which called it a blatant violation of the agreement reached last year between Tehran, the US and five other major powers. Under the terms of that agreement, Iran accepted the curtailment of its nuclear program in return for the lifting of sanctions imposed by the US and other countries.

“If this law is implemented it will be a blatant violation of the Iran deal and it will lead to our

resolute answer," Iranian President Hassan Rouhani told the Iranian parliament on Sunday.

Among the strongest proponents of the legislation was Democratic Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, who made clear that the threat of sanctions was directed not at any nuclear threat from Iran, but rather at the obstacle the country has posed to US hegemony in the Middle East. "Since the nuclear agreement came into force, Iran has continued its efforts to destabilize the region," he said.

The vote, with the unanimous support of the Democrats, places a weapon in the hands of the incoming Trump administration. The Republican president-elect repeatedly expressed his desire to abrogate the nuclear pact with Iran and has surrounded himself with right-wing militarists who are advocates of a confrontation with Tehran.

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