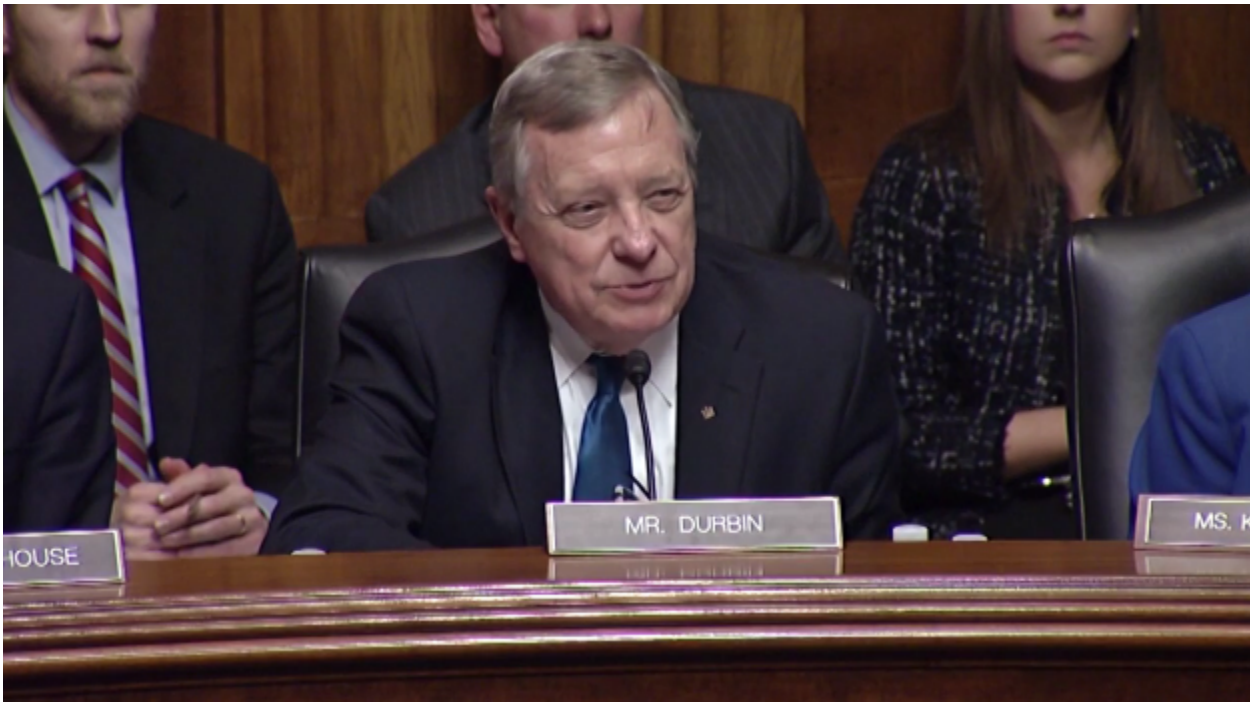


Durbin remarks at defense appropriation hearing with Sec. Mattis, Gen. Dunford

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WASHINGTON—U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL), Vice Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, made the following opening remarks at a hearing on the Fiscal Year 2017 Defense Supplemental with Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford:

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to join you in welcoming Secretary Mattis and General Dunford. I have tremendous respect for both of these outstanding leaders, and I give a special welcome to Secretary Mattis in his first appearance before the Defense Subcommittee.

Our Nation has been at war for nearly 16 years, and the toll of these conflicts can be measured in many ways. More than 6,900 Americans have given their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan, and more than 52,000 wounded.

Our VA clinics and hospitals are serving more than two and a half million veterans of these wars. And our taxpayers have provided \$1.8 trillion to support the women and men who continue to serve overseas.

So it is not surprising that we find that our Armed Forces are currently under strain.

But the evidence is mounting that it is not necessarily the decade and a half of war that is straining our military, but instead a self-inflicted wound: sequestration. Sequestration cuts in 2013 eliminated \$35 billion from DoD's base budget virtually overnight.

The shockwave of these cuts – which were never supposed to happen – rippled through the training, maintenance, and readiness of our military, such that the military Services have estimated it will take until the early 2020s to fully recover. We could tick off through sequestration's impact jobs and our economic growth just as easily, because it hit just as hard on domestic spending.

The Administration has proposed \$30 billion in additional defense spending: \$25 billion to rebuild readiness, and \$5 billion to increase spending on Afghanistan and the counter-ISIL campaign.

There are four concerns with this proposal that I hope will be addressed in this hearing.

First, the proposal appears to do very little to restore the readiness of our Armed Forces in the short term. Congress has already addressed \$5 billion of the requested funds in the pending defense appropriations bill.

Of the remaining funding, only about \$8 billion is for near-term training and maintenance activities. In addition, we are not being told that this package will accelerate the timeline for the Services to fully recover their readiness rates.

Second, the \$5 billion in overseas contingency operations funding is being requested without a strategy to support it. In fact, the President's new counter-ISIL strategy may not be presented to Congress until May.

Secretary Mattis and General Dunford, I hope you can provide insights on what this strategy may be, in hopes of addressing the concern that Congress may be asked to sign a blank check. In short, it's a readiness package that the Department says won't improve readiness, and war request disconnected from a strategy.

Third, the Administration's package proposes \$18 billion in cuts to non-defense programs to offset the increased military spending. The Administration has provided no details on these cuts, but we all know what is on the chopping block. The White House is already proposing extremely reckless cuts to the State Department for next year, jeopardizing our Nation's ability to deal with crises without resorting to arms.

I wished the White House had listened to then-General Jim Mattis' views on the State Department.

In 2013 as Commander of US Central Command, you stated, "If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately."

But the harm will go well beyond hurting our national security. It would cut medical research, education, and everything in between. Our Armed Forces depend on healthy, well-educated young Americans to sign up to serve our country. Cutting these programs will ultimately shrink the pool of Americans who can serve in our military, making these proposals very short-sighted.

Finally, the Administration's proposal does nothing about sequestration.

If Congress enacted this package tomorrow as-is, as OMB has submitted it, it would trigger an immediate across-the-board sequestration of military programs. It's unbelievable. OMB is asking to spend more than the law allows for defense. But it didn't ask for a change to the underlying law.

Previous administrations did this frequently, but not Trump. President Trump's proposal is incomplete, and really doesn't deal with this in a responsible way.

Mr. Secretary, General Dunford, we all recognize that there are holes in our Armed Forces that need to be fixed. I hope you can go further in your testimony than explaining those problems. Congress needs to know why you think this is the spending package that needs to be passed.

Considering the problems with this proposal – the cuts to domestic and diplomatic programs, the lack of a new counter-ISIL strategy, the modest funding for increased training, and the lack of any fix to sequestration – it appears that Congress may need to consider significant changes to the proposal.