

Pentagon pork barrel metastasizes into class warfare

“Now is not the time to talk about defense cuts while we are engaged in two theaters with men and women in harm’s way.”

This from Representative Vicky Hartzler, newly-elected Tea Party Republican from the military-rich 4th congressional district of Missouri. She is talking about a Pentagon budget which, not even counting the two wars, has grown by 81 percent since 2001.

The cancer at the heart of American democracy – and its budget -- is not unlimited campaign contributions, not tens of thousands of well-heeled lobbyists, not Congresspeople and their aides back and forth between Congressional positions and corporate lobbying.

It is not the massive increase in private sector government contracts, not the fact that each Congressperson represents his and her own district before the whole country.

It is all of those things interacting together and best symbolized in the hulking pork barrel that is the Defense Department.

Medicare and Social Security need to be reformed for the long run but lost in anti-government propaganda is the reality that these are “entitlements” because ordinary people have for decades paid into them and they are today still in surplus not deficit.

You can’t balance the budget on Planned Parenthood, WIC (Women, Infants and Children Nutrition), the Environmental Protection Agency and tiny cabinet budgets. Even interest payments are still under 5 percent of the total budget.

Once all the above are taken out, you have left only the Pentagon, about 19 percent of the total budget, and Medicaid, unemployment and welfare, about 29 percent.

If then, tax increases on the wealthy are off the table and the Pentagon is exempt from cuts, the unconscionable result is to throw all the costs of “fiscal responsibility” on the neediest of our citizens.

Talk about class warfare!

The Defense budget is \$700 billion spread across every state for military bases, personnel and weapons we don’t need, and sweetheart contracts guaranteeing profits for some of the richest corporations in the country.

The Pentagon budget, *Bloomberg Business Week* reports, is 12 times the size of China’s and Britain’s, 17 times Russia’s, 47 times Israel’s and 73 times Iran’s. We have more nuclear-powered attack and cruise-missile submarines (57) than the rest of the world combined.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates talks a good game but Pentagon “cuts” turn out to be only cuts in future increases!

The morass of Pentagon spending came to a symbolic head on Feb. 16 when the House of Representatives was called to vote on production of a \$450 million “second-source” engine backed by House Speaker John Boehner for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. General Electric would make the second engine in an Indiana factory where many workers in Boehner’s House district live.

Boehner’s new colleague, Hartzler, voted with Boehner to build the engine for a plane that has had so many development difficulties its projected per-plane cost has grown from \$62 million a decade ago to \$153 million two decades from now.

A week later, she released a statement declaring that she “has followed through on her pledge to deal with the nation’s fiscal crisis by voting ‘yes’” on Tea Party proposals to end “the job-destroying spending spree.” Forget that the F-35 was a military expenditure so unworthy that two successive presidents from opposite parties have opposed it.

House Armed Services Committee Chair Howard McKeon, an arch foe of Pentagon cuts, also voted for the second engine. Lockheed-Martin, Boeing and Northrop Grumman, three of the largest Pentagon contractors, have facilities in his California district and he is the single largest House recipient of campaign contributions from the industry.

The unsuccessful effort drew a split vote -- 130 Republicans and 68 Democrats -- but was no shining monument to bipartisanship. Rather, it memorialized the bipartisan realization that, sooner or later, every Congressman needs pork barrel votes for projects in his or her district.

Hartzler, whom I single out for her hypocrisy, is actually no worse than any other Congressman desperate for local pork and campaign contributions. And General Electric has not given up.

With no high rollers to lobby and give campaign contributions for them, the unemployed and those on Medicaid and welfare will pay the price.