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Interest Group Targets Candidates for Specifics On Pentagon Budget

By Jen DiMascio

It's no accident that in recent weeks, several Democratic presidential candidates have discussed cutting funding for specific weapon systems--primarily the F-22 and the V-22.

A campaign called Priorities!, led by Ben Cohen of Ben & Jerry's ice cream, has launched an aggressive "bird-dogging" effort to unearth where the candidates stand on specifics within the Pentagon budget.

When candidates are speaking at events across Iowa and New Hampshire, volunteers from Sensible Priorities have been coached to ask specific questions about the defense budget and follow up when the question is dodged.

"What we are doing is educating the people in the room and the news media covering the event," said Steve Varnum, director of Priorities New Hampshire.

The group, which loans volunteers a Chevy van "PigMobile" emblazoned with the words "Pentagon Budget," is pushing candidates to be more specific about how they would handle the defense department budget and where specific cuts might be made. Those cuts could be applied to other issues like education, healthcare, energy independence, job training and deficit reduction, the group says on its web site.

The goal of Priorities! is to make the federal budget a "top of mind" issue through the 2012 presidential election, Varnum said.

In terms of defense issues, the group bases its line of questioning on a report by Lawrence Korb with the Center for American Progress. The report recommends trimming the Pentagon's like abortion or gun control that drives

votes, and it has plans to continue budget by \$60 billion--including more than \$20 billion from procurement or research and development accounts.

More specifically it calls for the Pentagon to stop production of the "F/A-22 Raptor fighter attack aircraft, the SSN-774 Virginia-class attack submarine, the DDX Destroyer, the V-22 Osprey Tilt Rotor transport aircraft, the C-130J transport aircraft and all offensive space-based weapon systems." The report adds that the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and the Army's Future Combat System should be slowed to net \$23 billion in Fiscal Year 2007.

With that in mind, Priorities! bird-doggers have collected on their blog statements from a number of candidates saying they would support cutting funds for one or more of those programs including Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) former Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) and New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson (D).

Frontrunners in the Democratic race have been more circumspect about answering, with candidates like Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) pledging a thorough review of the Pentagon budget. Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) in July said he would not discuss cutting specific weapons systems but in a speech last week said that the F-22 and V-22 have not performed up to expectation.

On the Republican side, former New York Mayor Rudy Guiliani said he would redirect wasteful Pentagon spending either into funds for additional manpower or to update weapons, according to a blog entry.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) told the group he would continue to work to cut wasteful spending. Regarding the Osprey, he said the program is probably too far along to be stopped in the FY '09

budget without significant penalties.

Richard Aboulafia, an aerospace industry analyst with the Teal Group, raised a similar point with respect to the Raptor saying that a recent development would make trying to cut the F/A-22 program a "fool's game."

That development occurred late last month, when the Air Force awarded Lockheed Martin [LMT] a \$5 billion multiyear contract for 60 Raptor aircraft that will extend the aircraft's production line through 2011 (Defense Daily, Aug. 2).

That multiyear deal makes it nearly impossible now to cut the program, because of the potential monetary cost and the economic and political backlash, he said.

Aboulafia chalked the group's efforts up to good talking points for the left-leaning electorate but said that compared to the cost of fighting the war, the cost of these strategic systems is relatively small.

