

Member Testimony Submission
Congressman Keith Rothfus (PA-12)
House Appropriations Committee, Defense Subcommittee
Wednesday, April 15, 2015

Chairman Frelinghuysen, Ranking Member Visclosky, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for holding this hearing today and for receiving my testimony on the Fiscal Year 2016 Defense Appropriations bill. To be sure, with increased budgetary pressure, your work in crafting this important legislation will be filled with difficult choices about which programs to fund and where to cut.

It would have been my preference that Congress would have addressed this issue directly during the budget process and taken steps to responsibly fund our national defense, on-budget and with offsetting cuts. Unfortunately, that did not come to pass, and we are left with the present task of trying to fulfill our greatest responsibility while hampered by unnecessary fiscal constraints.

It is a result of these constraints that our military has been forced to implement policies like the Army's Aviation Restructuring Initiative (ARI). As you know, this policy will result in the Army eliminating all single-engine rotary wing aircraft (for example, OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopters) from its inventory and transferring all National Guard AH-64 Apaches to the active component. Army officials have stated that this restructuring is necessary to generate savings and make the remaining aviation fleet more affordable. I have long opposed this plan and for the second year in a row ask, Mr. Chairman, savings at what cost?

Since 9/11, the National Guard has repeatedly risen to the occasion. They have answered the call and fought bravely in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the height of these wars, nearly fifty percent of the Army's total force was a mix of reservists and members of the National Guard. The Pennsylvania National Guard alone contributed more than 42,000 individual deployments. They have fought side-by-side with the active component, all while continuing to achieve their important mission here at home. As the National Governors Association put it best, the modern National Guard has become "a highly experienced and capable combat force and an essential State partner in responding to domestic disasters and emergencies."

ARI will have devastating impacts on all that the National Guard has achieved. By stripping the National Guard of its Apache helicopters, the Army is ensuring that the National Guard will be less combat-ready and less able to provide operational depth. It will also deprive our nation of an operational reserve for these aircraft, which is essential to retention and management of talented aircrews. This represents a fundamental shift in the nature and role of the National Guard. It runs counter to the wisdom and preference of many members of Congress and their constituents.

This issue is important in Pennsylvania and to the 1-104th Attack Reconnaissance Battalion (ARB) in Johnstown. These highly-trained airmen and crew played an invaluable aerial support role in Afghanistan, where they flew their Apache helicopters and fought alongside the active component. The Army now proposes to replace these Apaches with a smaller

number of Blackhawks. This reduction will deprive the National Guard of both highly-trained personnel and equipment. It will result in the National Guard being less effective, less combat-capable, and less able to heed the call to defend this nation, both at home and abroad. Major General Wesley Craig, former-Adjutant General for the Pennsylvania National Guard, summarized this well when he stated that this “does not make sense for our community, commonwealth, or country.”

I offered similar criticism of ARI last year and joined my colleagues in urging for the creation of the National Commission on the Future of the Army. I also advocated that there should be no transfers or divestment of any Army aircraft, including Apaches, until after the Commission has had sufficient opportunity to examine ARI. I applauded the House Armed Services Committee for including those important provisions in the FY15 National Defense Authorization Act. But I was disappointed to see that, at the insistence of the Senate, the legislation also contained a glaring exception that allows the Army to transfer up to 48 Apaches beginning on October 1, 2015, prior to the Commission releasing its findings and recommendations.

When this legislation passed, many justifiably understood that the National Guard could comply by transferring a small number of Apaches from many different ARBs. The Army disagreed with that approach, however, and demanded that the National Guard inactivate two ARBs in their entirety. That is why, on April 1st, National Guard Bureau (NGB) announced that the 1-104th and 1-135th ARBs, located in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and

Whiteman Air Force Base, in Missouri, would be shut down. To me, it is unconscionable that these decisions are being made before the Commission has even held its first meeting.

The Commission was established to offer a deliberate approach to addressing force structure issues like ARI. So how does it make any sense to permit the Army to transfer these Apaches before the Commission has done its work? The answer is simple: It doesn't, and we need to put a stop to this before it is too late. Even NGB Chief General Frank Grass admits that once these transfers begin, it will be all but impossible to reverse them.

For that reason, I respectfully request that this Committee include a simple provision in this year's Defense Appropriations bill that prohibits funding to transfer any Apaches until the end of Fiscal Year 2016. This will provide sufficient time for the Commission to release its report, for the Army and the National Guard to respond, and for Congress to make a reasoned and well-informed decision.

Again, I recognize that this Committee will be forced to make many difficult decisions over the next month. But this isn't one of them. Providing a temporary freeze on the transfer of Apaches just makes sense and will ensure that irreparable harm is not done to our National Guard without due deliberation.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you this morning, and I am happy to address any questions that you may have.