

Testimony of Chairman William M. “Mac” Thornberry

Before Committee on House Administration

February 16, 2017

Chairman Harper, Ranking Member Brady and Members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on the budget request for the House Armed Services Committee.

My partner on the committee, Ranking Member Adam Smith, and I are both acutely aware of the budget challenges and daunting mission facing the agencies we oversee. The legislative branch, and the Committee on Armed Services in particular, is no different. The taxpayers rightfully expect their government to fulfill its constitutional responsibilities as effectively and efficiently as possible. While I wholeheartedly embrace this mandate, in my two years as Chairman of the Armed Services Committee I have seen first-hand what a few additional resources can do to truly expand the effectiveness of our oversight.

Last year, we stood up a dedicated team to focus on instituting major reforms to the Department of Defense. We wasted no time. In 2015, after considering the recommendations of the congressionally mandated Military Compensation and Retirement Commission, we implemented the first major change to the military retirement system in decades. Last year, we put the military commissary and health care systems on a sustainable footing. We have enacted the

most significant organizational changes to the Pentagon since Goldwater-Nichols and have mandated reductions in overhead, in flag officers, and in the number of civil servants. We have overhauled the Uniform Code of Military Justice. We have passed two rounds of deep acquisition reform designed to get more value for the taxpayer dollar. But, in order to accomplish those reforms, I had to reduce the number of staff members we have monitoring the individual programs of the Department of Defense. I still think that was the right call, but the truth is that we need to put more resources on both missions.

Reform must continue to be a major emphasis. We must become more agile in order to keep up with technological advances and with rapidly evolving threats. Our committee's oversight over the last two years, however, has uncovered systemic problems in the military that reform alone will not repair.

The military is facing a readiness crisis. From 2010 to 2014, the military budget was cut 21 percent. Yet, the world did not get 21 percent safer. We asked more of our military than ever, while the cuts insidiously eroded America's military capability. The Armed Services Committee hears it over and over again. Just last week we learned that less than half of the Navy's aircraft can fly because they are awaiting maintenance or lack spare parts. Only three of 58 brigade combat teams in the Army are considered "ready to fight tonight". Air Force pilots fly less than they did in the 1970s when our force was hollow and more than half

of their planes would qualify for antique vehicle license plates in the state of Virginia. The Marine Corps – which has been cannibalizing parts off museum aircraft to keep their planes in the air – is going to completely stop flying training missions in July due to lack of parts and funds for training hours.

The last time Congress passed a threat-based defense budget was in 2012. Keep in mind that in 2012 Russia was not bullying its neighbors, ISIS did not exist - nor was it inspiring terrorist attacks in the United States, and China was not building islands in the South China Sea. How have we responded? Cut the number of Airmen, Marines, and Soldiers; making deployments more frequent and dangerous for those who remain. That is simply immoral.

The committee is optimistic that we have a willing partner in the Administration to address these issues. Yet we must not forget that it is the responsibility of Congress, in Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution to “raise and maintain armies...”. The burden falls to us, and specifically the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, to do the oversight work necessary to ensure that the military is ready to fight today and in the future to be the guarantor of this nation’s security. It is equally important that as we race to rebuild the military that we do not overload the system with funding and plans that cannot be executed.

We must turn the tide, but without additional staff, Adam and I cannot do this work the way we should do it. The additional investment of approximately

\$3.1M we are seeking would provide the resources to hire to our full authorized manning of 71 and provide some long overdue adjustments to our current staff's salaries.

For the last three congresses, the HASC had been the largest committee in the House with 63 members. This year our membership reduced to 62 members while the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee grew, making us the 2nd largest committee this year. Simultaneously, the HASC has maintained the smallest staff to member ratio. Currently, the staff to member ratio is 1:1. If this budget request were approved, the staff to member ratio would only modestly grow to 1.14:1, which is still less than the ratio for the 1st and 3rd largest committees, who each average 1.45 staff for every 1 member.

Like the agencies we oversee, we have lived with the motto – do more with less. Even with the modest increase this committee received for the 114th Congress, I was only able to create the defense reform team by harvesting other billets from within the Armed Services Committee. We are taking a significant amount of risk in certain areas. For example, the full committee policy staff - with the responsibility for the military's activities in Europe, Asia, the Western Hemisphere, the Middle East, and Africa; ongoing contingency operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria; security cooperation; defense management and organization; national defense strategy; detention policy; counternarcotics; and

humanitarian assistance - has just 6 staffers: 4 for the majority and 2 for the minority, plus a clerk. The Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee, with oversight of special operations, counterterrorism, cyber, chem/bio defense, defense IT systems, science and technology, and emerging threats – has only 2 majority and 1 minority staffer and a shared clerk.

The committee has suspended almost all other necessary administrative costs, such as equipment, and has frozen COLA and merit increases for the last seven years. Management of the workforce with leadership succession planning and talent retention has become virtually impossible. Recruitment of staff has become extraordinarily challenging because of our frozen salary structure. Candidly, to address the national security issues facing the nation and the military's readiness crisis, the HASC cannot afford to hire inexperience. The human capital we require comes at a price tag the committee can no longer afford. Likewise, retention has also suffered as we cannot adequately recognize the contributions so many of the staff make to national defense.

Finally, let me assure you that I remain committed to maintaining the Armed Services Committee's track record of delivering results and implementing internal reforms that minimize cost and waste. We estimate and manage our committee's budget conservatively. For example, last year, the committee returned \$15,000, less than 2% of our budget. And as you well know, each year the HASC produces

the annual National Defense Authorization Act, which authorizes over \$600 billion. Last year, 1259 provisions were sent to conference on the NDAA and the final conference report included 961 pieces of legislation. The NDAA routinely sees over 700 amendments filed between committee consideration and the floor - with votes taken on over half of those.

Put another way, the HASC bears sole responsibility for regularly authorizing *over 50%* of the discretionary Federal budget and – should this committee support the additional resources that would allow the HASC to man to its authorized levels – the HASC will do so with *only 6%* of the manning for the authorizing committees. The committee has shepherded this legislation through the House and negotiations with the Senate each year, culminating into the bill’s signature into law for 55 years running. This would not be possible without the depth of experience of the staff.

Moreover, the HASC staff has taken the initiative to improve processes to reduce cost, waste, and staff resources associated with committee hearings, mark-ups, and conference negotiations with the Senate. These efforts have set the gold-standard for other committees. I would like to highlight just a few examples:

- The Speaker’s office recently circulated information regarding a database created by the HASC to other committees as a “best practice” for capturing questions for the record.

- The HASC started a pilot program with the House Recording Studio to stream all HASC hearings on Youtube, saving the committee thousands of dollars that would have been spent on an outside vendor. By streaming directly on Youtube, the hearing videos will now be archived there as well, ensuring the public has an easily searchable and viewable archive for our hearings.
- The committee uses a digital file sharing system on Box to digitally share, approve and process negotiated bill language and conference report language between the House and Senate. This file sharing system allows the committee to reduce the amount of hardcopy material printed and made the process more efficient and saved staff time by eliminating burdensome administrative requirements.
- The staff has created a committee electronic report-language database used to draft, edit, and compile the committee report language that accompanies the annual defense authorization bill. This process had previously been accomplished using a paper-based system, which consumed a significant amount of paper and committee resources. It also allows committee staff to input and review legislative text, as well as identify and track provisions that may trigger sequential referral. The committee now uses the system to prepare required activities reports and oversight plans. As a result, the

committee has reduced paper purchase by two-thirds. A number of House and Senate committees have, or are considering, adopting a similar model.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that the military remains in a readiness crisis. As the Army Chief of Staff testified this year, “If one or more unforeseen contingencies happen then the United States Army currently risks not having ready forces available to provide flexible options to our national leadership...And most importantly, we risk incurring significantly increased U.S. casualties.” We are now at a point where we face impossible and unwise choices: Continue to cut needed systems and training, further eroding readiness, or break faith with the troops. No one in this chamber wants to do any of those things.

There is another way, and it comes through sustained oversight and pragmatic reform. Both efforts are our responsibility- they are our first congressional duty. I truly believe we have a narrow opportunity to arrest this crisis – but I need the resources to do so. Please accept my thanks for your time and your consideration of the committee’s request.