

(JOE SKIPPER - REUTERS) As the cost of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan becomes an increasingly weighty factor for President Obama's national security team in determining the nation's troop presence there, an outspoken GOP House freshman is calling for more, not less, defense spending.

"We get ready for World War I, then we go all the way down into a bottomless pit," Rep. Allen West (R-Fla.) said Tuesday morning in an address at the Heritage Foundation. "Then we try to ramp it back up for World War II, and we go back down into a bottomless pit. If we don't have a steady state (of funding), and then a plus or minus, we will lose an opportunity to ensure that we protect America for the future, for our children and our grandchildren."

In making the case for ramped-up military spending, West, a retired Army veteran, drew upon several anecdotes from his 22 years of service, telling the audience that at times, "my friends who were in tank units had to use golf carts to practice tank tactics."

"I can tell you as an executive officer when we did not have enough money to buy tools to repair our howitzers, or we did not have enough money to get toilet paper for some of our soldiers," West continued. "We did not have enough money to buy the ammunition so that guys could stay out on the rifle range. And we find ourselves going down that exact same path."

West's remarks come as Congress is poised to vote later Tuesday on a measure that would raise the country's debt ceiling without any additional spending reductions. The measure, which is expected to fail, marks the first legislative step Congress is expected to take in the fight over the country's soaring debt ahead of an Aug. 2 deadline.

The debt-limit fight has been accompanied by increased scrutiny from lawmakers on U.S. defense spending; with the country facing a \$14.3 trillion debt, some lawmakers have pushed for military spending to be on the table in deficit-reduction talks, while others have argued that it should be off-limits.

The spending debate has also led to greater debate over U.S. military involvement abroad, particularly as the American involvement in Libya has passed the 60-day mark and as public support for the war in Afghanistan wanes. The House last week narrowly defeated a measure that would have called for a speedy withdrawal from Afghanistan, and this week will vote on a resolution that would end the U.S. involvement in Libya.

In addition to calling for greater defense spending, West called for a "national security roadmap" that more aggressively goes after threats to American security, not just al Qaeda.

"One of the things that I kind of got upset with was that a lot of people up here in Washington, D.C., said that, you know, 'You cut the head off the snake,'" West said, referring to the killing of Osama bin Laden by U.S. forces earlier this month. "Once again, that's the lack of strategic clarity and understanding of who the enemy is. All you really did is you cut the head off a multi-headed hydra."

But West also expressed skepticism about the U.S. involvement in Libya. "I cannot understand and I don't know what the goal and objective are," he said. "No one can clearly tell me who these rebels or who the rebel leaders are."

And on Pakistan, West reiterated his call for cutting off aid to the country.

"The fact that Pakistan is looking to get aircraft from China, that's not an ally," he said. "China's going to go in and build a naval base. That's not an ally. You know, when I look at this incident with Osama bin Laden, it comes down to three things: it's either ignorance, incompetence or it's complicity. Now any of those three is bad, but the sum of all those three is really bad. . . . We don't need Pakistan to be successful."

West also weighed in on the December repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" law barring gays from serving openly in the military, arguing that the military is not "a social experiment."

"Let me put it very simply. The United States military exists to win the nation's wars," West said. "When you join the military, it takes individual behavior and conforms it to the military. Now, if we start to have the perspective and belief in this nation that the military conforms to individual behavior, then we have lost the understanding of what it means to be in the United States military. ... The United States military is not there as a social experiment.

"For those that will sit up there and say, 'Well, Congressman West, you should understand because after all, you are black,' unless I'm Michael Jackson, I can't change my color," West said, to laughter from the audience. "But people can change behavior. And you do not base being a part of the military on adjusting for individual behavior. That's my concern."

Troops are receiving training on the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell," and the Pentagon is expected to certify to Congress that the military has completed the readiness process sometime before Defense Secretary Robert Gates retires at the end of June.