

By William E. Gibson

WASHINGTON -- With passionate prodding from South Florida Congressman Allen West, the U.S. House passed a \$642 billion defense bill on Friday that would limit President Barack Obama's plans to reduce the number of American troops and wind down the war in Afghanistan.

West, a former Army commander in Iraq and military adviser in Afghanistan, made an emotional appeal for the Republican-sponsored bill, which is designed to slow the pace of withdrawal from Afghanistan and fend off bigger cuts to the Pentagon budget.

When Democrats tried to amend the bill to hasten the end of the war, West, R-Plantation, angrily fired back: "What you are telling our men and women in combat, what you are saying to the enemy, is that we are going to leave those men and women hanging, that we are not going to provide them the resources."

"Why in God's name would we want to repeat some of the horrible things that I saw my older brother go through in Vietnam, where we restricted funding?"

The debate showed West's impact on defense matters as a member of the Armed Services Committee. Some members have deferred to West, a freshman, because of his experience as an Army lieutenant colonel who led troops in combat and because of his popularity among tea-party conservatives across the country.

"No one knows the perils of an insufficiently manned Army better than Allen West," said Armed Services Committee Chairman Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif.

West inserted a provision that would limit the Army's troop reductions to no more than 15,000 a year and Marine Corps reductions to no more than 5,000 a year during fiscal 2014 through 2017. The Pentagon proposes to reduce the Army by 72,000 and the Marines by 20,000.

West's troop-strength measure is part of wide-ranging defense bill that casts aside a budget-cutting agreement hammered out last year as part of negotiations over raising the debt ceiling. The spending blueprint would add \$8 billion for the military next year, \$4 billion more than Obama proposed to meet budget-reduction targets.

The bill provides for a host of spending that the Pentagon opposes, preserving ships, aircraft and weapons systems that the Pentagon plans to cut. And it rejects another round of base closings.

A Democratic amendment to cut \$8 billion from the bill failed on a vote of 252-to-170. The final bill passed 299-to-120.

Most Democrats voted against the bill, including South Florida Reps. Ted Deutch of Boca Raton, Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Weston, Alcee Hastings of Miramar and Frederica Wilson of Miami Gardens. Democrat Corrine Brown of Jacksonville voted for it.

Those voting "yes" included Central Florida Republicans John Mica of Winter Park, Dan Webster of Winter Garden, Sandy Adams of Orlando and Bill Posey of Rockledge.

Obama threatened to veto the House bill, and the Senate almost certainly will craft a very different version, setting up a larger debate over budget priorities that will spill into the presidential and congressional campaigns.

Republicans hope to meet deficit-reduction targets by limiting cuts to defense but slashing food stamps and other domestic programs that serve the poor. Democrats generally hope to preserve those programs while hastening the withdrawal from Afghanistan and cutting deeply into defense.

Many Democrats said the best way to protect the troops is to bring them home.

"Two-thirds of Americans oppose our military occupation of Afghanistan," said U.S. Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Calif. "After nearly 11 years, enough is enough."

Not for West.

"The message you are sending to our troops is that you are abandoning them," he told Democrats. "The message that you send to the Taliban, al-Qaida. . . to every single Islamic radical group is that we have turned our backs on our military, and you can continue to kill them."

"I will not turn my back on those men and women, who are still my friends, some of them even my relatives."

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