Proposal would change acquisition process

Lawmakers aim to remove hurdles, boost accountability

BY CHRISTIAN DAVENPORT

In the annals of government contracting, there are all sorts of embarrassments that reveal how wasteful and cumbersome the process can be, from the $600 toilet seat to billions wasted in failed programs.

But in his quest to reform the way the Pentagon buys things, Rep. Mac Thornberry stumbled across a doozy that left even the veteran lawmaker shaking his head.

At some point, a federal bureaucrat grew concerned that the military's ships could, over time, corrode after long exposure to salt water. And so the Pentagon launched an anti-corrosion effort that required officials to fill out paperwork ensuring that their vessels would sail on corrosion-free.

But it didn't stop there. Now the Pentagon requires that everything it buys would be able to stand up to corrosion — even, say, computer software.

After more than a year studying how to improve the Pentagon's procurement system, Thornberry (R-Tex.) is set to announce legislation this week that he said is a first step in a long journey of reform.

One of the top priorities, he said, is to strip away the mundane and meaningless hurdles that acquisition officers face, such as the anti-corrosion campaign.

"We're making sure that goes away," he said in an interview with The Washington Post on Friday.

The effort is designed to save money and to prevent headline-generating debacles, such as the $46 billion the Pentagon spent on at least a dozen programs over a recent 10-year stretch that never became operational.

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"The way we buy things is not keeping pace," said Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-Tex.), referring to Pentagon contracting issues.

But the cost overruns and delays are also impairing the military's ability to respond quickly to crises around the world, he said. And the technological superiority the country has long taken for granted is now slipping as potential adversaries invest in new weapon systems designed to counter U.S. advances.

"It's important for us to work to see that money is spent better," Thornberry said. "But I am increasingly concerned about how fast the world is moving, and the way we buy things is not keeping pace."

"The system has just grown these barnacles around it that's made it so sluggish it's a wonder anything comes out the other end," he said.

With federal acquisitions regulations running tens of thousands of pages, and entrenched bureaucratic processes that date back decades, the task of reforming acquisition is a Herculean one that has failed time after time. And some are skeptical that Thornberry will be able to achieve meaningful change.

"Every possible reform has already been tried," Gordon Adams, a professor at American University's School of International Service, said by e-mail. "But as long as the services are incentivized to underprice a system (so it will fit in the budget) and contractors are incentivized to under-bid (to win the contract), it is decidedly hard to change the outcome: hardware that costs too much, takes too long to build and underperforms."

But there is also the sense that there is an opportunity to succeed now that hasn't been there in the past with Thornberry leading the effort in the House, and Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) chairing the Senate Armed Services Committee. Ashton B. Carter, President Obama's new defense secretary, has long pushed for acquisition reform, and is expected to continue to do so as secretary.

Thornberry's legislation would give program managers more responsibility, while making them more accountable, he said. At the same time, the effort would strip away what many see as impediments, such the constant stream of reports required by Congress, the repeated testing of systems and laborious certification requirements.

As it works now, program managers have to wait for government lawyers to sign off that a new weapon system has reached certain milestones. That added layer often gums up the system, Thornberry said.

A recent report by the Government Accountability Office found that on many major weapons programs, it took Pentagon officials more than two years to complete the steps necessary to document the milestone requirements, for example.

"You get the lawyers involved in looking over their shoulder to see whether it's okay," Thornberry said. "So we're getting the lawyers out of it."

He said he would propose making a temporary fund to train acquisition officers permanent. And he would also train the workforce to work more closely with the commercial sector, especially in technology fields, where much of the innovation is happening.

Thornberry said he would also propose raising the threshold, from $100,000 to $500,000, at which military officials would have to subject their purchases to the full acquisition selection system.

"My fundamental purpose here is to simplify the system so program mangers can manage their programs and not just manage the bureaucracy and the process," he said. "And so we can hold them accountable for what they do."

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Federal Diary

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He is away. His column will resume when he returns.