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Troops need equipment? Let 'em drink beer.

By Dana Milbank
Washington Post Staff Writer
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According to the annual [Gallup poll of confidence in American institutions](#), the military ranks first, earning high marks from 76 percent of Americans, and Congress ranks dead last, at 11 percent.

To understand that 7 to 1 disparity, look no further than Wednesday's hearing of the House defense appropriations subcommittee. Defense Secretary [Bob Gates](#) and Joint Chiefs Chairman [Mike Mullen](#) proved themselves again to be serious men, speaking frankly about the crises we face. The lawmakers did not.

In his [opening statement](#), Gates fervently appealed for funds requested by [Gen. David Petraeus](#) for equipment to protect troops in Afghanistan. The money has been held up because it would come from a project benefiting a major contributor to the committee chairman, [Bill Young \(R-Fla.\)](#).

"Mr. Chairman, our troops need this force-protection equipment, and they need it now," Gates pleaded. "Every day that goes by without this equipment, the lives of our troops are at greater risk." He urged action "today" on the funds, admonishing: "We should not put American lives at risk to protect specific programs or contractors."

The lawmakers, however, had other priorities. The first question to Gates and Mullen proffered by [Rep. Jack Kingston](#) (R-Ga.), a senior panel member, related to his contention that 18-year-old soldiers "cannot have a beer at the NCO club or whatever." To remedy this injustice, Kingston said, he introduced legislation so that underage soldiers can drink beer on their posts. He asked the Pentagon to report to him on "how that could be a good idea."

Here's a better idea, Congressman: How about you take care of the big problems first? Such as Gates's contention that the military would "face a crisis" if Congress continues to fund the government with short-term spending resolutions, or if it enacts the spending bill recently [passed by House Republicans](#). Gates said it would damage research, ground aircraft and leave the military unable "to properly carry out its mission, maintain readiness and prepare for the future."

But the members of Congress could not function at such a high level of thought.

The first committee member to question Gates, [Rep. Jo Bonner](#) (R-Ala.), began with a request that the secretary "forgive me for being a little bit parochial in my questions." He was upset that a big Pentagon contract had gone to Boeing, and not to a rival that employed "people along America's Gulf

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This, in turn, led the next questioner, Boeing-country [Rep. Norm Dicks](#) (D-Wash.), to devote his entire time to defending the choice of Boeing. "I wasn't planning on getting into this," he said, blaming Bonner.

With few exceptions, the lawmakers wanted to talk about just about anything other than the urgent challenge presented by Gates and Mullen.

[Rep. Jim Moran](#) (D-Va.) complained about the [war in Afghanistan](#). [Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen](#) (R-N.J.) opined about creating a no-fly zone over Libya. [Rep. Maurice Hinchey](#) (D-N.Y.) had thoughts about the presidential helicopter.

Gates dispatched them easily enough. On calls for a no-fly zone over Libya, he said, "Let's just call a spade a spade: A no-fly zone begins with an attack on Libya to destroy the air defenses." On calls to depart Afghanistan, he said, "We will confront exactly what we did when we did exactly the same thing in 1989 and turned our backs on Afghanistan, and 12 years later, we're attacked from there." He even indulged Kingston in a colloquy about the risky behaviors of 18-year-old men and their use of fake IDs.

Yet Gates couldn't get the lawmakers to agree to his urgent - and modest - request to shift \$1.2 billion in Pentagon funds to protect soldiers' lives in Afghanistan. He asked for the money a month ago, but Young's committee hadn't acted.

Why? Because Young objects to the money being taken away from the Army's Humvee program. Never mind that the Army has more Humvees than it wants. They are manufactured by AM General - which happens to be Young's third-largest campaign contributor. Its executives have funneled him more than \$80,000, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Gates told Young in blunt terms that his delay was putting lives at risk, but the gentleman from AM General was unmoved. "We would like to analyze with you in some detail another source of that funding," he replied, suggesting they talk more about a "helpful way to approach this."

Helpful to whom, Mr. Chairman? Your country, or your contributors?

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