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Despite talk of cuts, Pentagon spending still going up Like

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BY NANCY A. YOUSSEF
MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

WASHINGTON — Amid growing calls for government spending cuts, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates unveiled Thursday a proposed five-year budget plan that would cut tens of thousands of troops from the Army and Marine Corps,

eliminate two key weapons systems, and raise the cost of health insurance for some military retirees.

The proposal still foresees military spending growing by three percent next year, to \$553 billion, not including spending on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But the plan would trim about \$78 billion from anticipated spending over the next five years, with even greater cuts coming after 2015, when the size of the Army and Marine Corps would shrink by 47,000 troops — primarily in response to the anticipated U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of 2014.

Gates didn't say how much he thinks the annual health care premium should rise for military retirees who are still of working age. But he noted that many military retirees take full time jobs after retirement, while keeping their military insurance, whose basic annual enrollment fee of \$460 for a family hasn't changed since 1995.

He promised next year's budget will include "modest increases" to premiums for retirees of working age, with a goal of reducing the Pentagon's medical expenses by \$7 billion over five years.

The budget Gates outlined would mark the 14th year in a row that Pentagon spending has increased. Pentagon spending has more than doubled in 10 years and is projected to rise to \$620.2 billion by 2015; in fiscal year 2001, the defense budget was \$291.2 billion. Adjusted for inflation, the Defense Department budget has risen 65 percent over the past decade.

Even that may not be enough for Republicans in Congress, however.

"I am concerned that this budget proposal for the Defense Department recommends less than one percent real growth in the Departments base budget over the next five years," said Arizona Sen. John McCain, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, in a statement after Gates briefed him on the plan. "I look forward to receiving additional information to fully evaluate the impact of the administration's defense budget request on the missions and operations of our military forces."

Other analysts said that if the military budget were ever to be cut seriously, it would require the U.S. to rethink its military strategy.

"The administration continues say that the purpose of the U.S. military is not the defense of the United States but of the whole world," said Christopher Preble, the director of foreign policy studies at the CATO Institute, a libertarian policy organization in Washington. "I think it is worth asking whether the American taxpayer is willing to continue footing for the world's security."

Gone under the Gates proposal: a \$14 billion amphibious Marine vehicle, the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, designed by General Dynamics Corp., and a ground-launched missile produced by Raytheon Co. that was part of a future combat system for the Army.

In addition, Gates proposed placing the Marine variant of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, produced by Lockheed Martin, on a two-year probation, saying that Lockheed Martin has only that long to correct



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problems in what's turned into the Pentagon's costliest weapons program.

But those specific savings would be used for other programs.

The Air Force budget includes \$34 billion for advanced drone aircraft, improved radar on existing F-15 fighter jets and helping develop a new long-range nuclear bomber.

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