

## **Editorial: Burden of Trump's border promise falls squarely on military**

Marc A. Thiessen

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JOINT BASE LANGLEY-EUSTIS had lost 700 jobs as part of a U.S. Air Force reorganization in 2015 before the Air National Guard announced plans to locate a Cyber Operations Squadron at the facility in Hampton.

Members of Virginia's congressional delegation joined with state and local officials to celebrate the news, which eased the sting of those job losses. Since cyber operations is a priority of the nation's armed forces, securing that squadron also meant a more confident outlook for the Peninsula base.

On Wednesday, however, the Pentagon announced that \$10 million for a cyber operations facility at Langley-Eustis would be redirected to pay for construction of a barrier along the southern border between the United States and Mexico.

It is one of 127 projects, totaling \$3.6 billion, that the U.S. Department of Defense will postpone or cancel so that President Donald Trump can pay for a border wall that Congress has refused to fund. The money will go to 11 projects in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, building miles of new fencing and replacing existing barriers.

In addition to the cyber operations facility, three other Virginia projects are affected. The Pentagon also pulled \$26.1 million for a ship maintenance facility in Portsmouth and \$41 million to replace hazardous materials warehouses in Norfolk and Portsmouth.

In all, 23 states, three territories and 19 countries will see defense spending reduced so that money can be sent to the border. The projects selected include those affecting readiness, such as firearms ranges, hangers, maintenance operations and training facilities, as well as many that will diminish the quality of life on bases for service members and their families, such as schools and day care facilities.

And for what?

A wall that will not stem the tide of migrants seeking entry to the United States or end the humanitarian crisis along the border.

A wall that even some of his allies say is excessive as well as expensive and limited in its effectiveness.

A wall that the president promised during his campaign and that he insisted Mexico would pay for, and that he now believes is his biggest obstacle to reelection.

In short, it's a wasteful and reckless endeavor, a byproduct of profound dysfunction in the nation's capital, driven by a president determined to pursue this folly. But it comes with a cost that service members and their families are now being asked to pay.

During his campaign for the White House, Trump made immigration his signature issue, promising if elected to direct construction of a barrier along the southern border between the United States and Mexico to slow the tide of migrants crossing into the country illegally.

In doing so, Trump tapped into a powerful undercurrent in the electorate: Americans who felt marginalized or abandoned by their government and who worried their economic status was threatened by immigrants in the workforce.

"Build the wall," they chanted at his campaign rallies, a refrain that remains an enthusiastic line at the president's event since he won the 2016 election.

And it's a promise that Trump intends to fulfill before he goes before voters again next year, wagering that it is the one pledge he cannot afford to break if he hopes to secure another term.

Trouble is, a border wall is a relic, an antiquated countermeasure to a problem better addressed through innovation. There's no indication that a stronger, taller or better built barrier will deter migrants, and plenty of evidence that technology, rather than concrete and steel, is a better, cheaper solution.

And it's not just Trump opponents who say so.

The Cato Institute, a prominent libertarian think tank, cast considerable doubt on Trump's border wall, citing all the ways in which alternative approaches have a greater chance of bolstering security. And several right-wing immigration reform groups have cast doubt about the wall being the administration's silver bullet on immigration.

But because Trump said it would be built — and telling crowds again and again that Mexico would pay for it — he continues to recklessly press ahead, undaunted by what pain he may inflict on the nation and the armed forces as a result.

Doubts about the strategy will be magnified in light of the Pentagon's announcement on Wednesday.

Democrats predictably greeted the news with outrage. Sen. Mark Warner said the reallocation makes the United States "less safe" and "less equipped to tackle threats here at home and abroad." Sen. Tim Kaine accused "the commander-in-chief [of] shirking [his] duty so he can advance his own political agenda."

"Peak military readiness, critical modernization projects, and disaster recovery are top national security priorities in Hampton Roads and beyond," said Congresswoman Elaine Luria, who represents the 2nd District. "The administration should protect initiatives that keep Virginia and America safe."

But even some Republicans expressed concern that the president should pursue funding for the border through regular appropriations and by working with Congress rather than through these extraordinary measures.

Utah Sen. Mitt Romney called on the president to “use the appropriate channels in Congress, rather than divert already appropriated funding away from military construction projects and therefore undermining military readiness,”

And Rep. Mac Thornberry of Texas, the senior Republican on the House Armed Services Committee, was mostly correct in his “regret that the president has been forced to divert funding for our troops.”

Mostly correct, because it wasn't force that compelled the Pentagon's action. This was a choice, one the president demanded out of expediency, vanity and cynical political positioning rather than national security.

Yet, this hand-wringing by lawmakers belies the fact that they are empowered by Congress to act — on the budget, on immigration, on military force and so many other responsibilities ceded over time to the executive branch.

The power and the responsibility to stop this abuse of the appropriations process, to protect the military and to restore order to the federal system rests on the shoulders of those 535 men and women elected to serve in Congress.

Hampton Roads, and the people who wear the uniform here, need better from them. The nation needs better from them.