

Obama's Budget: Freezing the Poor

By Amy Goodman

February 16, 2011 "TruthDig" -- President Barack Obama unleashed his proposed 2012 budget this week, pronouncing, proudly: "I've called for a freeze on annual domestic spending over the next five years. This freeze would cut the deficit by more than \$400 billion over the next decade, bringing this kind of spending—domestic discretionary spending—to its lowest share of our economy since Dwight Eisenhower was president."

Focus on the word "freeze." That is exactly what many people might do, if this budget passes as proposed. While defense spending increases, with the largest Pentagon funding request since World War II, the budget calls for cutting in half a program called Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP.

LIHEAP offers block grants to states so they can offer financial assistance to low-income households in order to meet home energy needs, mostly for heating. Most of its recipients are the elderly and disabled. The program is currently funded at more than \$5 billion. Obama is calling for that to be slashed to \$2.57 billion—roughly half. This life-or-death program, which literally can help prevent people from freezing to death, represents less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the proposed \$3.7 trillion annual budget.

Compare this with the proposed military budget. "Defense spending" is a misnomer. Until 1947-48, the Pentagon was officially, and appropriately, called the War Department. In the proposed budget released on Valentine's Day, the Department of Defense request is \$553 billion for the base budget, an increase of \$22 billion above the 2010 appropriation. The White House has touted what it calls "\$78 billion" in cuts that Defense Secretary Robert Gates is considering. But as the Institute for Policy Studies notes: "The Defense Department talks about cutting its own budget—\$78 billion over five years—and most reporting takes this at face value. It shouldn't. The Pentagon is following the familiar tradition of planning ambitious increases, paring them back and calling this a cut."

The \$553 billion Pentagon budget doesn't even include war. To Obama's credit, the costs are actually in the budget. Recall, President George W. Bush repeatedly called the expenditures "emergency" needs, and pressured Congress to pass supplemental funding, outside of the normal budget process. The Obama administration, nevertheless, has given the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan the Orwellian

moniker "Overseas Contingency Operations," and is asking for \$118 billion. Add to that the \$55 billion for the National Intelligence Program (a budget item for which the amount has never before been revealed, according to government secrecy expert Steven Aftergood), and the publicly revealed military/intelligence budget is at close to three-quarters of a trillion dollars.

Obama's 216-page budget doesn't mention "Pentagon" once. He does invoke the name of President Eisenhower, though. Two times he credits Eisenhower for creating the national interstate highway system, and, as mentioned, boasts of the proposed spending freeze: "This freeze would be the most aggressive effort to restrain discretionary spending to take effect in 30 years and, by 2015, would lower nonsecurity discretionary funding as a share of the economy to the lowest level since Dwight D. Eisenhower was president."

If he is going to reference his predecessor, he should learn from Eisenhower's prescient warning, given in his farewell speech in 1961: "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist."

Another Eisenhower speech that should guide Obama was given in April 1953, before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, just two weeks after he was inaugurated as president. In it, the general-turned-president said, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed."

This is one of the coldest winters on record. One in eight people in the U.S. is on food stamps, the largest percentage of Americans ever. More, as well, are without health insurance, despite the initial benefits of the health-care reform act passed last year.

Americans are cold, hungry and unemployed. By increasing military spending, already greater than all of the world's military budgets combined, we are only spreading that misery abroad. We should get our priorities straight.

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