

The Pentagon deserves the same scrutiny as Obamacare

Mary Ann McGivern | Nov. 18, 2013 NCR Today

Congress took Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius to the woodshed for the online health care sign-up disaster. And it's true: Lots of mistakes were made for a lot of reasons.

I heard one retired weapons procurement officer explain that other departments can't sidestep government contracting requirements the way the Department of Defense can. He and others have said Congress doesn't permit incremental development of projects, from mass transit to, apparently, health care. Full-blown rollout is the standard.

But I guess I'll wait till hell freezes over for hearings on the cost overruns and inability to meet performance specifications of the F-35. This fleet is expected to cost half a trillion dollars, but it doesn't have the flight range it was supposed to have; it doesn't have a short enough landing for most carriers; its capability to land and take off vertically is limited. And it crashes at a higher-than-projected rate.

We don't need the F-35. Nobody who is a potential enemy can match the old F-15 and F-18, planes we have given away and sold widely. The Defense Department has usurped the State Department's diplomatic role, making friends by giving arms and weapons training around the world.

The reason people say we need the F-35 is fear of the failure of that diplomacy, that our gifts may be turned back on us and that foreign bases, staging areas for our fighters and supply planes, might be closed to us one day. Really, we would be more secure if we focused more on real diplomacy and less on armaments at home and abroad.

The same way we need better health care delivery, we need better disaster relief delivery at home and abroad. A couple of hospital ships would be a better investment than aircraft carriers. A plan for global clean water would gain us many more friends than the gifts of our used F-18s will ever gain.

At the very least, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel should be appearing before Congress as frequently as Secretary Sebelius to defend cost overruns and procurement failures.

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