

Pentagon pulls plug on Comanche helicopter program after already spending \$7 billion

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TOM BROKAW, anchor: NBC News IN DEPTH tonight, an expensive about-face for the Pentagon. The Army today canceled its Comanche helicopter program after sinking \$7 billion and 21 years of effort into producing a new generation helicopter. It's one of the biggest program cancellations in the Army's history, and as NBC's Jim Miklaszewski tells us now, there are several reasons for it.

JIM MIKLASZEWSKI reporting: The Comanche was supposed to be the US Army's attack helicopter for the future, but today it was grounded for good.

General PETER SCHOOMAKER (Army Chief of Staff): It's a big decision. We know it's a big decision, but it's the right decision.

MIKLASZEWSKI: After 20 years and \$7 billion in development, the Comanche's original mission to attack Soviet tanks simply disappeared.

Mr. ERIC MILLER (Project on Government Oversight): It's a weapon that might not be as useful today as it was back in the '80s when it was first conceived.

MIKLASZEWSKI: But the Comanche program was also overbudget, overweight and years behind schedule. The projected cost for each helicopter skyrocketed from \$12 million to 58 million or nearly 600 percent. The total price tag for 650 choppers, more than \$39 billion.

Gen. SCHOOMAKER: Is it prudent for us as an Army or for the taxpayer that we spend \$39 billion on something that's not a good idea?

MIKLASZEWSKI: But the Army still intends to pour 14 billion of Comanche money into the 800 new Apache, Black Hawk and Chinook helicopters, and to improve defensive systems to counter shoulder-fired missiles, which brought down nine helicopters in Iraq, killing 32 soldiers.

But the decision to kill the Comanche was about more than national defense. It was also about election-year politics.

Putting Comanche money back into other helicopter programs could save more than 1300 jobs in five states, including Connecticut and Florida, critical to the Bush White House in this election year. But Connecticut Democrat Joe Lieberman isn't buying it.

Senator JOSEPH LIEBERMAN: Is this the right decision for national security? Because it's a total turnaround from what the Army has been arguing on behalf of Comanche for years and years.

MIKLASZEWSKI: Whatever the outcome, the Army's decision is potentially a true transformation in military thinking, voluntarily killing a weapons program before the costs fly totally out of sight. Jim Miklaszewski, NBC News, the Pentagon.