

Exon: defense of free world first responsibility of U.S.

By Leslie Kendrick

The No. 1 responsibility of the United States is the defense of the country and of the free world, U.S. Sen. James Exon said Thursday.

The senator from Nebraska expressed his views on the defense budget, the economy and federal budget cuts in a noon speech to the Lincoln Optimists Club.

The biggest spender among Senate committees, Exon said, is the Senate Arms Service Committee, on which he serves. Most of the committee's activities are not made public, he said.

Exon said a blank check should not be written to the military. But, he said, providing for the common defense of the country is the No. 1 priority of the nation. This view, Exon said, is shared by Senate Democrats and Republicans alike.

There are many problems with the military services, Exon said. The U.S. Navy has a shortage of 22,000 senior non-commissioned servicemen, he said.

"There are warships just sitting at port because they don't have the sailors to sail them," Exon said.

Exon said 60 percent of military servicemen have not graduated from high school.

"The U.S. Air Force is the only branch of the service that is in good shape," he said.

Exon said one way the Senate is trying to improve the services is by voting in the military pay bill. The bill would benefit the senior non-commissioned servicemen and hopefully keep them in the service, he said.

"I'm willing to give one more year to the volunteer services and see if we get better recruits," Exon said.

"Right now the whole registration process is a mess," he said. "In the long run we will probably not be able to get along without conscription."

Exon said he had heard that some people thought the interest rate would go down to 12 percent or 13 percent by the end of the year. Moving back to a good economy will be slow, he said, and a 12 percent or 13 percent interest rate will probably not be achieved by the end of the year.

The economic problems of the country will never be solved, Exon said, until the budget is balanced. Exon expressed his support for federal budget cuts to keep up with the high interest rates the United States is paying.

"Everyone who thinks that just cutting out fraud

and waste costs will help is living in an unrealistic world," Exon said.

Social Security programs will have to be cut, Exon said, in order to achieve a balanced budget by 1984. He said the pension program of Social Security is in trouble and the government will start allowing inter-fund borrowing from the Medicare program to pay pensions.

Exon said the pension program was never meant to be a full-benefit program. It was meant to provide basic benefits which would encourage the pensioners to save, he said.

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