

Rep. John Murtha of Pennsylvania, a longtime member of the House of Representatives subcommittee that oversees Pentagon spending, and latterly its chairman, has died following complications from gallbladder surgery, according to his office. He was 77.

Murtha was taken into hospital in December and had to postpone a hearing with Defense Secretary Robert Gates on the administration's strategy in Afghanistan. The congressman returned to work after a few days in the hospital and helped oversee final passage of the 2010 defense appropriations bill.

Murtha represented Pennsylvania's 12th Congressional District since 1974, making him the chamber's eighth most senior member. According to his biography on the House of Representatives Web site, Murtha was the first Vietnam War combat veteran elected to Congress.

He was considered one of "the kings of pork" on Capitol Hill by taxpayer watchdog groups for requesting tens of millions of dollars in earmarks.

On his House Web site, Murtha strongly defended earmarks, saying, "I believe that elected representatives of the people understand their constituents and districts best."

As a former member of the U S Marine Corps, it has long been a view expressed in Defence Viewpoints that Rep. Murtha was one of the strongest supporters of the F-35B STOVL variant of the Joint Strike Fighter, which is designed to equip the U S Marine Corps and the Royal Navy's new carriers.

Taken together with the removal of a USMC as head of the programme and his replacement by a US Navy Admiral, and a possible smaller UK call off for an aircraft whose price continues to drift north, the scrapping of the F-35B variant must now be a stronger possibility than it was just a few weeks ago.

Murtha, a former Marine, earned a reputation as one of Congress's loudest anti-war voices. He initially supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but he stunned much of Washington when he called for a swift U.S. pullout in November 2005, saying, "U.S. and coalition troops have done all they can. ... It's time for a change in direction."

Before joining the House, he was in the Pennsylvania state Legislature. He also served 37 years in the Marines and Marine Corps Reserves. He retired from the Reserves in 1990 and received the Navy Distinguished Service Medal.