

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Nuclear Weapons Policy Questioned

At least two Democratic members of the Senate Armed Services Committee expressed concern, during a full committee hearing on Feb. 13, that the United States has lowered the threshold for using nuclear weapons, including with respect to Iraq. Last year's Nuclear Posture Review proposed the development of so-called earth-penetrator weapons that would be employed against deeply buried bunkers. The development of new weapons, and new ways to use them, as called for by the review, is what has prompted the concerns.

Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.), the ranking Democrat on the committee, asked Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, if our development of new nuclear weapons would make it more likely that other nations would also pursue similar development activities. Rather than staying in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Levin asked whether other countries might say, "Well, you're looking at new ways to use nuclear weapons, why shouldn't we?" Levin's question unanswered, Rumsfeld justified developing new weapons, complaining about the "enormous amount of underground tunneling" going on in the world. He claimed that all of that tunneling is for "activities underground that are for production, that are for manufacturing, that are for development, for storage," and the inability to reach such activities "creates a very serious obstacle to the U.S. national security."

Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) then raised the question of nuclear weapons planning with respect to a possible war in Iraq. He noted that news reports have claimed that the U.S. Strategic Command is elaborating plans for their use against non-nu-

clear countries, including Iraq. "Wouldn't that violate a long-held commitment under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of not attacking non-nuclear states that are not aligned with nuclear states?" Kennedy asked. Again Rumsfeld sidestepped the question: "Our policy historically has been generally that we will not foreclose the possible use of nuclear weapons if attacked." However, he assured Kennedy, "we have every confidence, that in the event force is to be used in Iraq, that we can do what needs to be done using conventional capabilities."

House GOP Reforms 1996 Welfare Reform

The House GOP leadership used its rigid control of House procedures to ram through a bill, by 230-192, to renew and revise the 1996 welfare reform law, on Feb. 13. The Republicans brought the bill to the floor without its being considered by any of the five committees with jurisdiction, and under a rule for debate that prevented all but two amendments, and which limited debate to two hours.

Democrats were incensed not only over the procedure, but they also charged that the bill ignored economic realities. Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-N.Y.) reported that applications for welfare assistance in Monroe County, New York (which includes the formerly industrial city of Rochester) were up 17% from 2000 to 2001, and with requests for emergency housing placements up 25% over the same period. The bill "fails to meet this growing need and fails to address the most fundamental goal of welfare reform—moving recipients into real jobs and out of poverty," she said.

The bill, as described by Rep.

Debra Price (R-Ohio) provides \$16.6 billion for the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program, by making block grants to the states; it increases work activity requirements for participants from the current 50% to 70% by 2008; and adds \$2 billion, on top of the original \$4.7 billion, for child care. She also claimed that the bill gives the states much more flexibility than they had before to "really give them the tools they need," to retool their programs.

The axiomatic basis of the bill is the "success" of the 1996 reform, which forces heads of households to work, usually at below union or prevailing wage, for their "assistance." Wherever the Democrats challenged this basis, it has been, at best, weak.

Omnibus Appropriations Bill Sent to President

The Fiscal 2003 appropriations process was finally brought to a close on Feb. 13, when both the House and the Senate completed action on the conference report on the omnibus appropriations bill. The conference report itself was the result of late-night negotiations over the week, involving House and Senate negotiators, and also Vice President Dick Cheney. The result was a 3,000 page bill that arrived in the House chamber at 6 a.m. on the Feb. 13. The bill, which wraps 11 of the 13 annual spending bills into one package, included a compromise, across-the-board cut of 0.65%, which maintained the discretionary spending level of \$751 billion demanded by the White House. At Cheney's behest, however, another \$10 billion was added to cover ongoing military operations, including Afghanistan.

Democrats criticized the bill, with Rep. Martin Frost (D-Tex.) blasting

the procedure by which most of the House members were forced to vote on a gargantuan bill that most of them had not seen. He said that the bringing up of the bill, more than four months into the fiscal year “is an admission that the Republican Congress has failed in its most fundamental responsibility: addressing national priorities from homeland security and the economy to education and health care.”

Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.V.) told the Senate that the conference agreement cuts total domestic spending by \$8 billion, including for homeland security. Because of White House “intransigence,” in refusing to spend all appropriated funds for homeland security, he said, “America is woefully unprepared to prevent or respond to another terrorist attack.” He added that the conference report cuts spending for first responders by \$1.6 billion, border security by \$182 million, embassy security by \$42 million, and by \$130 million in hiring police officers, from levels voted up by the Appropriations Committee, last year.

New Balanced Budget Amendment Effort

Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.) proved once again that Congress is still in “the valley of the clueless” when it comes to understanding the Federal budget crisis: On Feb. 13, he announced that he would introduce a resolution, with 93 co-sponsors, to amend the Constitution to require a balanced budget. The amendment would prohibit the government from spending more money than it takes in, with the exception of a declaration of war or a three-fifths vote of the Congress. The language of Istook’s amendment is identical to that of the mid-1990s, which

the Senate sent to defeat by one vote in 1997. “No ordinary law can restrain Congress” from spending money, Istook said, “because Congress has the power to remove that safeguard whenever it wishes, by a simple majority vote.” Therefore, he claimed, Constitutional protection is the only way the budget can be balanced.

However, while the earlier measure was part of the Conservative Revolution’s “Contract on America,” the GOP leadership is somewhat less enthusiastic this time around. Standing beside Istook when he made his announcement was Judiciary Committee chairman James Sensenbrenner (R-Wisc.), who expressed his full support for the bill, making committee action likely. He plans to have it reported out of the full committee by July 4, after which, he said, “I hope the leadership will schedule it for a floor vote.” Even though Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) sent along a written statement of support, Sensenbrenner did not seem to have full confidence that the House leadership will support the measure. Further, no similar measure has been introduced into the Senate, nor could Istook’s spokesman say whether anyone in the Senate was considering it.

Afghanistan Policy Hotly Criticized

Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Peter Rodman and State Department Coordinator for Afghanistan Assistance David Johnson were at the receiving end of bipartisan criticism of the Bush Administration’s policy in Afghanistan during a hearing of the Senate Foreign relations Committee on Feb. 12. Committee chairman Richard Lu-

gar (R-Ind.) was somewhat restrained, but noted that the effort to find a country to replace Germany and the Netherlands in command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul, is still ongoing. He also pointed to the fact that the \$1 billion per year in reported drug production and trafficking profits “are lining the pockets of some of the same warlords who are threatening the stability” of the government of President Hamid Karzai. “The United States must formulate a long-term plan, to address the threats associated with narco-trafficking,” he insisted.

The ranking Democrat on the committee, Sen. Joseph Biden (Del.), was less moderate, however. Biden challenged Rodman and Johnson’s optimism, on their definition of “stability” as a lack of violence. “That was not the mandate. The mandate was a central government controlling all of Afghanistan that was multi-ethnic and violence-free. . . . There is no stability in Afghanistan as we defined it initially,” Biden said.

In the context of the war drive against Iraq, Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) noted that Rodman and Johnson’s testimony emphasized the importance of the other nations’ participation in the Afghanistan operation, and hence “that should guide our acceleration and enthusiasm about going to war with Iraq.” He also advised the Bush Administration to “slow down a bit here and understand that others might have a different view of the world than us. But it may well be that it’s important to accommodate those views, because if we are to fulfill the commitments” laid out by President Bush, “then it’s going to take a tremendous coalition of common interest, working with institutions like the United Nations and like NATO to accomplish it.”