

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Will Administration's Missile Defense Work?

The White House is committed to deploying an initial missile defense system by September. However, its responses to questions from Democratic Senators at a March 11 Armed Services Committee session clarified that that system will be deployed with insufficient operational testing to provide any confidence that it could defend the United States from a North Korean missile attack.

Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.) challenged the witnesses as to whether or not modelling and simulation, being used extensively in the program, could provide valid test results. Thomas P. Christie, the Pentagon's Director of Operational Test and Evaluation, had previously told Congress that "modelling and simulation are not a good substitute for integrated system testing." Reed took this to mean that "at this time, we cannot be sure that the actual system would work against a real North Korean threat"; Christie agreed. Reed then went on to note that the next scheduled flight test of the system will include a GPS device on the target warhead, which, Missile Defense Agency director Lt. Gen. Ronald Kadish explained, is to simulate a sensor which cannot be in the right place for the test. "So we're deploying a system which we can't simulate through and validate the simulations of a North Korean attack, and we're relying on GPS for engagement," Reed said. "It just confounds, in my mind, the idea of deploying these systems."

Senate Passes Budget Resolution

The Senate voted 51-45 on March 11, to approve the Fiscal 2005 Budget Resolution. While Republicans got most of what they wanted, they were dealt a setback on the issue of budget

enforcement, when the Senate approved an amendment sponsored by Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wisc.) to fully reinstate what is known as the pay-as-you-go rule. The rule would require that any tax cuts or spending increases be paid for by offsets elsewhere. Feingold argued that reinstating the rule would make it harder for the Senate "to make the deficit worse." The amendment passed the Senate 51-48, over the objections of Senate Budget Committee chairman Don Nickles (R-Okla), who complained that it "discriminates against taxes" and would make it difficult to maintain tax levels where they are now.

Otherwise, the Senate rejected a raft of Democratic amendments that would increase spending in particular areas, or reduce tax cuts. One of those was an amendment by Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.), that would have stricken the language requiring the Senate Finance Committee to make changes to the tax laws within the reconciliation process. Byrd charged that the reconciliation process "has morphed into an annual exercise where the majority party takes advantage" of limitations on amendments and debate "to shield controversial legislation from public discussion." Byrd argued that the GOP tax proposals ought to be subject to full debate under the regular order of the Senate. Nickles, as if to confirm Byrd's charges, complained that the Senate has become so partisan that the only way to pass the tax cut bills is by using the reconciliation process.

The House Budget Committee began marking up its resolution on March 11, with the goal of bringing it to the House floor the following week. But a squabble among Republicans over budget enforcement forced chairman Jim Nussle (R-Iowa.) to schedule a second mark-up session for March 17 in order to appease the budget hawks. The most important difference

between the two Houses is that the House bill provides \$50 billion for contingency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan; the Senate's, only \$30 billion. The House bill, otherwise, provides \$821 billion in discretionary spending, which was the White House request.

Democrats Challenge White House Free Trade Policy

U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick came under fire, at a March 11 House Ways and Means Committee hearing, from Democrats who made an effort to put trade policy into the larger context of the economic policy of the Bush Administration. Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) told Zoellick that Democrats would like to participate in the development of trade agreements, but "it seems like there's a hurdle that we can't overcome, and that is establishing some standards, some labor standards, some environment standards so that it doesn't appear that there's a race to the bottom in terms of getting the lowest paid workers throughout the world." Rangel also noted that in his home city of New York, 50% of African American males are unemployed "and it's difficult to tell them the value of free trade."

Rep. Sander Levin (D-Mich.) followed up by demanding that the administration stop demonizing those who disagree with its trade policy, as isolationists. When Levin began to pile on Zoellick about labor standards and problems with the Central American Free Trade Agreement, Zoellick shot back, "The reason the CAFTA has trouble is because we have a bunch of economic isolationists using labor as an excuse" to try to kill the agreement. Aside from Rangel's reference to the race to the bottom, the recycling of especially immigrant labor to drive down wages, did not figure prominently.