

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Appropriations Process Gets Under Way in House

The House passed its first two appropriations bills on May 17 and May 19, and although they both passed by wide margins, the road ahead for the appropriations process is anything but clear. The House passed the Homeland Security appropriations bill on May 17, by a vote of 424 to 1, and the Interior and Environment bill on May 19, by a vote of 329 to 89. In addition, the House Appropriations Committee reported the Energy and Water Development bill and the Military Quality of Life/Veterans Affairs bill on May 18.

The Appropriations Committee, however, funded a number of programs well over the Bush Administration's budget request. The Army Corps of Engineers gets \$4.7 billion, \$414 million more than the request, but still \$293 million less than Fiscal 2005. Veterans' health care gets \$21 billion, which is \$1 billion above the request and \$1.64 billion above Fiscal 2005. In addition, the committee rejected a number of measures the Administration had demanded in its budget. These include the plan for the Power Marketing Administrations to sell hydroelectric power at "market rates," and proposed fee increases for veterans seeking healthcare at Veterans Affairs medical facilities. Rep. David Obey (D-Wisc.) also added, in committee, an amendment to the Homeland Security bill that provides \$100 million to states to help them pay for the costs of implementing the new drivers' license standards included in the just passed REAL ID act.

During debate on the two House-passed bills, Democrats complained that not enough resources had been provided for the programs under the two bills. That lack of resources, however, is not the fault of the Appropriations Committee, Obey pointed out. "This House has decided to make as a

higher priority providing very large tax cuts for the next 10 years, and a huge percentage of those tax cuts has gone to the most blessed persons in this society," he said.

House De-Nuclearizes 'Bunker Buster' Bomb

On May 18, the House Armed Services Committee passed its version of the Fiscal 2006 defense authorization bill. In doing so, it rewrote the language covering the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator bomb, the so-called nuclear bunker buster, effectively changing the purpose of the study that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has been demanding. The committee action moves the program from the Department of Energy to the Department of Defense (DoD), and removes from it the word "nuclear."

According to an aide to a senior Democratic member of the committee, the practical effect of doing this is so that "the purpose of the program is no longer to explore the nuclear option." He said that the sled test, which will ram a weapon casing into a concrete wall in order to collect data for an earth-penetrating weapon, will now be meant to inform a conventional test. If the program were to remain in the Energy Department, it could be used only to inform the development of a nuclear weapon. He added that if the DoD were to try to use the results of such a test for a nuclear penetrator, they would have to go back to the Congress to justify it.

Nonetheless, committee Democrats are concerned that the language in the bill is sufficiently vague that the DoD might try to do just that. The test, the Democrats say in their minority report on the bill, "should be conducted in a manner that only informs conven-

tional payloads, and if this is not technically feasible, there should be no further work in designing modified or new nuclear weapon designs based on the sled test data."

Greater Oversight Of FEMA Urged

A Department of Homeland Security Inspector General (DHS IG) report, released earlier in May, documents how, after four hurricanes hit Florida in six weeks last year, the Federal Emergency Management Agency spent \$31 million in Miami-Dade County even though damage in the county was minimal. DHS IG Richard Skinner testified to the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, on May 18, that FEMA awarded funds for damage to homes and automobiles without doing proper damage assessments. As a result of FEMA's improper inclusion of Miami-Dade County in the disaster area, residents not actually eligible for damage assistance were able to apply. Skinner noted the lack of internal controls in the FEMA program which "increase the potential for fraud, waste, and abuse."

FEMA's problems in Florida prompted Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) to introduce legislation that would tighten the rules by which FEMA awards disaster assistance. It would require preliminary damage assessments before any assistance can be paid out, tighten the rules so FEMA inspectors can better identify losses of household items, tighten penalties for fraud, and strengthen background checks for FEMA employees. Nelson also called on Congress to do a better job of oversight. "Congress needs now to act in order to regain the public trust by ensuring that taxpayer money appropriated is spent wisely," he said.