

Democrats Remold Military Budget

By John Isaacs | May 10, 2007

While Congress has focused on the war in Iraq during the first four months of 2007, it has now begun to turn its attention to one of the two annual Pentagon spending bills, the fiscal 2008 Defense Authorization Bill. The bill will provide a venue for fights over a new generation of nuclear weapons, missile defense, space weapons, and nonproliferation programs—a relatively small portion of the overall \$647 billion measure.

This annual bill authorizes funding for armed services personnel, procurement of new weapons, military construction projects, operations and maintenance (for things like fixing equipment and training), and research and development. It will also provide another vehicle for votes on whether and how to end the Iraq War—even though the fate of the fiscal 2007 Supplemental Appropriations Bill, which is largely devoted to paying for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, remained unresolved at the time this was written.

On May 2, the nuclear weapons-portion of the authorization bill began to wend its way through the congressional labyrinth. With Democrats in charge of the new Congress, and Rep. Ellen Tauscher (D-CA) now chairing the House Armed Services Strategic Forces Subcommittee, cuts were made to a number of ill-conceived programs in the preliminary markup of the bill.

The subcommittee's most controversial decision was to cut \$764 million from the administration's \$9.5 billion request for missile defense programs. The subcommittee explained that it felt funding should be redirected from "less mature, high-risk ballistic missile defense

efforts" toward "missile defense programs that offer near-term war-fighter benefits." Notable among the missile defense cuts was \$160 million of the \$310 million requested for the controversial third national missile defense site, which is to be in Europe (the other two are in Alaska and California). The administration asked for funds to begin work on interceptor silos in Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic, but the subcommittee's funding restrictions may halt proposed work in Poland, at least temporarily.

A number of NATO countries are upset that the Bush administration has decided to negotiate directly with Poland and the Czech Republic, both NATO member countries, instead of involving the NATO alliance as a whole. Moscow is unhappy with Washington's desire to place national missile defense sites in Europe and has not been assuaged by U.S. assurances that it seeks only to defend allies against future threats from Iran. Even Washington's promises of future U.S.-Russian missile defense cooperation are not gaining traction in Moscow.

The subcommittee's other actions on missile defense included cutting \$400 million from the \$517 million administration request for the

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Airborne Laser program, a controversial effort to place a laser on an aircraft capable of shooting down missiles, which has demonstrated little progress through its early development stages. At the same time, the subcommittee added funds for the navy's more successful short-range Aegis missile defense system and the Patriot PAC-3.

These changes have inflamed conservative Republican legislators, who were already upset because the administration's fiscal 2008 request asks for about \$500 million less than appropriated in fiscal 2007. Even before the markup, Sen. John Kyl (R-AZ), one of the Senate's leading advocates of missile defense and advanced space weaponry, told a National Defense University seminar: "This year will be a very tough year for us" (Defense Daily, April 20, 2007). He also argued that it is "the wrong time to put on the brakes" if U.S. and European missile defense sites might help prevent an Iranian missile attack.

Republicans have enthusiastically supported missile defense since it was resurrected in 1983 by President Ronald Reagan—who is, if the first Republican candidates' debate on May 3 is any indication, apparently the patron saint of all current GOP presidential hopefuls. During the 1990s, Republicans hectored the Clinton administration for its "fly before you buy" approach to Star Wars—making sure the system works before deploying it—and even won legislative approval in 1999 to deploy national missile defense as soon as technically possible.

On May 1, Rep. Eric Cantor (R-VA), chief deputy whip for House Republicans, wrote a letter to his colleagues stating: "Cutting missile defense is not an option. Such an irresponsible move

may compromise some of the significant gains we have made in recent years in developing an effective missile defense web."

Even Republicans who joined in the 11–0 unanimous vote for the subcommittee's markup complained about the missile defense cuts and promised to work to restore the funds.

Subcommittee member Rep. Trent Franks (R-AZ) wrote in the *Washington Times* on May 2: "The third site funding proposals must not be slowed down because some members of Congress do not have the intestinal fortitude to deploy a layered and robust missile defense."

The ranking Republican on the subcommittee, Rep. Terry Everett (R-AL), suggested that although he voted for the bill on May 2, he would work with Franks to restore funding for the third site later in the legislative process.

At the full House Armed Services Committee level, critics and supporters of missile defense compromised. While some funding for the Airborne Laser program and for other programs was restored, the funds came from other missile defense programs, leaving the top line cut to missile defense at \$764 million. The committee also added language instructing the Pentagon to return to Congress to request funding for the third missile defense site in Europe if, and only if, agreement is reached with Poland and the Czech Republic.

Though missile defense has a powerful domestic constituency, nuclear weapons do not enjoy nearly as much support. Aside from the Bush administration and the nuclear weapons laboratories, there are few cheerleaders for a new generation of nuclear weapons.

Tauscher's subcommittee cut \$45 million from the administration's \$119 million request for a new generation of nuclear weapons, euphemistically known as the Reliable Replacement Warhead program, leaving \$74 million to continue research, design, and cost studies. The subcommittee also barred moving to "engineering development," the next stage of weapons work. If these decisions survive the legislative process, a decision on proceeding to build new nuclear weapons is likely to be left to the new president taking office in 2009.

In explaining the subcommittee's restrictions on this new nuclear weapon, Tauscher urged the Department of Energy and the National Nuclear Security Administration to "walk before they run with modernization of the nuclear weapons stockpile and the weapons complex." This language is truly commendable, considering the fact that the facility selected to lead the Reliable Replacement Warhead program, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, is in Tauscher's district, and more than 8,000 people are employed there.

Budget cuts to new nuclear weapons programs are likely to be less controversial than those made to missile defense. Even when Republicans were in control the past two years, Congress killed funding for earlier Bush requests for new nuclear weapons such as the nuclear "bunker buster," officially called the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator. While many Republicans are willing to speak up for missile defense, few have defended the administration's nuclear weapons plans.

Nevertheless, new nuclear weapons do have a few defenders in conservative circles, including Frank Gaffney's Center for Security Policy,

which argues on its website: "The condition of the Nation's aging stockpile dictates that modernization of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is required." This position has little resonance in Congress.

The Bush administration's policies toward nuclear weapons have been controversial. In its December 2001 Nuclear Posture Review, the administration embraced the possible first use of nuclear weapons against "deep underground bunkers or bio-weapon facilities" in countries without nuclear weapons such as Syria, Libya, Iran, and Iraq. In March 2005, the Pentagon's draft of the revised doctrine for the use of nuclear weapons specifically envisioned the use of nuclear weapons to preempt a nation or a terrorist group from developing weapons of mass destruction that could be used one day against the United States, its troops, or its allies.

With the days of the Bush administration drawing to a close, the Tauscher subcommittee voted to establish a "congressionally appointed, bipartisan congressional commission to reevaluate the U.S. strategic posture." This proposal, noteworthy for avoiding any Bush appointees, follows a January 4, 2007 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed by George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn that advocated moving toward a "world free of nuclear weapons." More than 15 years after the end of the Cold War, there is increasing interest in rethinking U.S. nuclear weapons policy, and this bipartisan commission seems to be a good start.

In another positive move, the subcommittee cut funding (the exact amount was unknown as of this writing) for the navy's conventional Trident modernization program and limited available funding to research and development.

This program, killed by Congress in 2006, would place conventional warheads on Trident missiles aboard forward patrolling U.S. nuclear submarines, providing the capability to hit targets across the globe in less than an hour with a non-nuclear warhead on a submarine-launched ballistic missile. In the fog of war, the launch of conventional warheads on nuclear-capable ballistic missiles might provoke a nuclear counterattack by Russia or China because they would not be sure what kind of attacking warhead was involved. There would be great risk of accidental, mistaken, or unauthorized launch.

The subcommittee also cut the entire \$10 million administration request for a proposed space test bed. The space test bed, if carried forward, would put one or more missile-targeting interceptor satellites into orbit. A long-established international norm has kept offensive weapons from being stationed in space or being used against space-based targets. An attempt to turn that norm into an international

treaty barring offensive weapons in space has been blocked by the Bush administration. Such weapons threaten the commercial, scientific, and military use of space, all fields in which the United States is the world's leader. Congress previously blocked a request for the space test bed in 2006.

All these decisions will be considered, and perhaps some will be modified or overturned, by the full House of Representatives, the Senate, or in a joint Senate and House conference committee. There may be moves for further cuts in nuclear weapons programs and missile defense initiatives. Most of these issues will be further debated when Congress takes up the annual Defense Appropriations Bill later in the year. At this early stage, however, the outlook is promising for some modest victories.

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