

House Armed Services Committee

DEMOCRATS

Ike Skelton, Ranking Member

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Defense Authorization Bill Includes Multiple Democratic Priorities

WASHINGTON D.C.— Representative Ike Skelton, Ranking Member on the Armed Services Committee made the following statement on the National Defense Authorization Bill:

“This is a good defense authorization bill that will improve the lives of our service men and women, retirees, veterans, and their families. House Armed Services Committee Democrats support our troops, and the many personnel programs and benefits in this bill show our appreciation for their service to our country. By increasing military pay, reforming the Survivor Benefit Plan, providing new and improved family housing, and enhancing health care for reservists, this bill provides real benefits for the people who are the centerpiece of America’s military might.”

The following are highlights from conference report:

PAY RAISE

By giving the troops a 3.5% raise across the board, the Congress recognizes the hard work and sacrifice made by the men and women in uniform and the need to live up to its responsibility to improve their quality of life whenever possible.

TRICARE FOR NATIONAL GUARD AND RESERVISTS

Non-active duty reservists who have been called to active duty on or after September 11, 2001, for more than 30 days and commit to continue serving in the national guard or reserves would be eligible for health care coverage. For each 90 days of continuous active duty, a reservist would be entitled to one additional year of coverage, subject to a 28% premium. The bill would also authorize one year of coverage for a member who may otherwise be eligible but was unable to fulfill the requirement due to an injury, illness or disease incurred while deployed.

“The Defense Authorization bill implements long overdue benefits for our reservists and their families,” Committee Member Rick Larsen (WA) said. “Right now our reservists are stretched thin by operations in Iraq and around the globe. Congress must fulfill its commitments to the women and men of our armed forces, both active duty and reserves, that we will protect and care for them and their families back home. The TRICARE benefits in this year's Defense Authorization bill help fulfill that promise.”

SURVIVOR BENEFIT PLAN

After much Democratic wrangling, this bill finally eliminates the social security offsets to the Survivor Benefit Plan payments for the spouses of military retirees, phased in over four years.

"I am very pleased that we have reached an agreement to finally eliminate the Survivor Benefit Penalty. This action is long overdue," remarked Committee Member Lane Evans (IL). "We here in Congress must do a better job of placing the priorities of our military families and surviving spouses over the priorities of those who want more tax cuts for the extremely wealthy and overseas corporations."

END STRENGTH

Democrats have been supportive of an increase in military end strength, and after many years of fighting for this issue, the National Defense Authorization bill has finally included an increase in the end strength of the Army by 20,000 and the Marine Corps by 3,000 in FY 2005.

"I am pleased that the final bill authorizes an increase in Army and Marine Corps end strength. I have advocated increasing the size of our military forces since 1995, and this year we begin to address this critical need. We must have additional troops to help reduce the current strain on our forces." said Ranking Member Ike Skelton (MO).

ELIMINATION OF THE PRIVATIZED HOUSING CAP

Democrats have long championed an innovative housing program that allows private contractors to build and maintain military family housing on or near military bases. The program was in danger after both the House and Senate Republican budget resolutions provided no headroom for lifting the spending cap that was placed on the program from the beginning. The Defense Authorization eliminates the spending cap, thereby allowing new housing for almost 50,000 military families to continue on schedule.

"Right now, thousands of young men and women are putting their lives on the line overseas and thousands of family members are anxiously awaiting their return home. With these families sacrificing so much, Congress should carry out its responsibilities to provide for our military families," commented Committee Member Silvestre Reyes (TX).

"However, my colleagues and I had to fight hard to save the military's housing privatization program in this year's budget. Today, when we are asking so much of our military families, providing quality homes is the least we can do," concluded Reyes.

Committee Member Solomon Ortiz (TX) commented, "The idea for public-private military housing was born in Kingsville, Texas, and the program was so wildly successful that in 1996 it was implemented service-wide. The need is still enormous - service members and their families are still often in condemned or insufficient housing. It is a

shame we had to beg and beg to get the conference to include this provision to keep our brave soldiers - and the families they leave behind - in housing that is not condemned.

DOE SICK WORKER COMPENSATION

The bill transfers the responsibility of handling claims by former Department of Energy (DOE) employees from the Department of Energy to the Department of Labor. DOE has mishandled the claims of 25,000 nuclear weapons production workers who developed serious illnesses after exposure to toxic or radioactive materials at DOE sites.

The bill also provides for medical benefits and compensation to these workers and their survivors. Former uranium workers are also made eligible for these payments.

“I want to thank my House and Senate colleagues for making the changes necessary to begin paying the backlog of claims filed by our sick and injured Cold War-era nuclear workers,” said Committee Member Tim Ryan (OH). “By transferring this program over to Department of Labor and making the funding mandatory, we have shown these individuals that their hard work and sacrifices have not been forgotten.”

“Former employees of America’s nuclear laboratories compromised their health to help the U.S. win the Cold War, and their reward has been denial and disappointment. At last count, just 6 percent of the 23,000 claims received by the DOE from sick workers were completed, while the DOL has processed 95 percent of claims filed. Mismanagement of the sick worker program has to end. And so today, I am pleased to report success on moving the inadequate DOE-run program to the Labor Department, so that we can provide the compensation these men and women have earned,” said Representative Ellen O. Tauscher (CA).

AERIAL REFUELING TANKERS

The conference report authorizes a multiyear procurement of 100 new aerial refueling tankers, replacing a questionable leasing deal. It also establishes competition for the contract to maintain the new tankers and leaves in place previously-mandated studies to determine refueling needs and the correct approach to meeting them.

Committee Member Rick Larsen (WA) commented "The Defense Authorization bill reinforces the fact that the Air Force badly needs 100 new refueling tankers. While this bill changes the process for getting these tankers, it doesn't change the fact that the Air Force needs them as quickly as possible. I am confident that the House and Senate will work together to ensure that our Air Force refueling capability, integral to our nation's defense, stays on track."

“I’m pleased that, in HR 4200, we’ve taken clear steps to meet the Air Force requirement for new tanker aircraft,” said Representative Adam Smith (WA). “By doing so, we enhance the readiness and projection capabilities of our Air Force while at the same time bolstering the American commercial aircraft production base. I’m confident that we’re now able to move forward on this key program and it’s my expectation that it is in the best interest of the Air Force and taxpayers.

The tanker agreement means that our Air Force will be better able to face the challenges of tomorrow and meet the tasks we ask of them – we’re giving them the tools they need to support missions and win.”

NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION PROGRAMS

Both nonproliferation and counter-threat reduction programs are fully funded at \$1.35 billion and \$409.2 million respectively. Democrats have long pushed to fund these important programs at the maximum level possible, and are pleased to see that this legislation achieves that goal.

The conference report also leans towards global reduction of mass weapons by providing a two-year waiver authority for the chemical weapons destruction facility at Shchuch’ye in the former Soviet Union so that the destruction of Cold War era chemical and biological weapons may continue.

“I am pleased this conference reported a defense bill that fully funds proven programs which reduce the capacity for an attack against us using non-conventional weapons,” said Committee Member Baron Hill (IN). “I join the rest of the conferees in expressing my hope that the Congress will continue to fully support these crucial programs in the future as America confronts constantly changing threats at home and abroad.”

BODY ARMOR REIMBURSEMENT

This bill includes a Democratic-sponsored provision to reimburse service members for protective equipment purchased for use in combat during a time when the military did not provide an adequate level of equipment.

“This is a win for the troops and their family members who used their own money to purchase much-needed body armor while serving overseas,” said Committee Member John Larson (CT). “The federal government has an obligation to provide every resource possible to protect our troops in the field and for too long that obligation was not met. The fact that we are righting this wrong is a credit to all those who spoke out about this, including several of my constituents. I am grateful to my colleagues on the committee for their help as we worked to include this language. It is unconscionable that our troops or their families would have to spend their own money for adequate body armor.”

STABILIZATION STRATEGY ON IRAQ

The bill requires the President to produce a report on his strategy for stabilizing Iraq, including his strategy for standing up a professional Iraqi security forces.

Ranking Member Ike Skelton (MO) remarked, “What has been needed for some time is a clear strategy for stabilizing Iraq. This conference report includes a requirement for such a strategy from the President, including a plan for how we will establish viable and professional Iraqi security forces to provide for the long-term security of the Iraqi people. Without sound strategy and professional security forces, we will not succeed in

Iraq. This provision will help Congress and the American people get the information we need about how we achieve success in Iraq.”

DETAINEE PROVISIONS

Democrats strongly support the provision in this bill that reiterates U.S. policies with regards to the humane treatment of military detainees, and it restates for the world the policies and ideology that we believe in and abide by.

CONTRACTORS SERVING WITH MILITARY FORCES

The conference report also retains and builds upon the substance of a Democratic amendment offered in committee that requires the Department of Defense to report on the rules of operation and roles filled by private contractors in Iraq and to produce guidance on the role of contractors operating with deployed U.S. forces in general.

“Private contractors are playing a much larger role in Iraq than anyone anticipated, and we have to get a handle on their activities,” said Committee Member Neil Abercrombie (HI). “The purpose of my amendment, and this subsequent legislation, is to provide standards of accountability and transparency for private contractors working for DoD, and to collect information about what they’re doing and how deeply involved they are.”

MISSILE DEFENSE

Requires the Ballistic Missile Defense System to finally be tested against realistic criteria. This an important provision that has long been backed by HASC Democrats.

Committee Member John Spratt (SC) noted, "The Conference Report provides a hefty \$10 billion for ballistic missile defense, a \$1 billion increase over last year, but with that money come some new controls. The Pentagon’s Office of Testing and Evaluation regains an oversight role. OT& E is tasked with devising a realistic test regimen for BMD.

In addition, each block of BMD will be subjected to Selected Acquisition Report disciplines. This means that each block will have baselines for cost, schedule, and performance, against which actual results can be measured. These are steps forward and long overdue in a program of this magnitude. "

BASE REALIGNMENT AND CLOSURE

Although there are mixed opinions regarding the Base Realignment and Closure round schedule for 2005 at a time when the nation is at war and the President has announced major overseas base restructuring, the conference report did not delay the next BRAC round for two years, as was proposed by House members. Many Democrats remain concerned about this conference outcome on base closure.

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