

## Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

### House Panel Doubts DOD Gulf Illness Policy

The Defense Department came under fire, again, for years-long stalling on the Gulf War Syndrome, during a hearing of the National Security Subcommittee of the House Government Reform Committee, on June 1. Subcommittee chairman Chris Shays (R-Conn.) told the hearing at the outset, that those who fought the 1991 war “need just one thing written in stone, a sustained commitment to research and treatments for the mysterious maladies and syndromes triggered by battlefield exposures.” The hearing, which came after veterans of earlier wars were lionized on Memorial Day, heard accounts of how poorly Gulf War veterans have been treated for the illnesses they have suffered.

Both members of the subcommittee, and also witnesses, questioned the Pentagon’s commitment to research on Gulf War illnesses, and its methods of research dating back to the mid-’90s. Steve Robinson, the executive director of the National Gulf War Resource Center, noted that “the same people who denied the existence of illnesses in Gulf War veterans are now responsible for monitoring the health outcomes” of military personnel deployed to the present wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Keith Rhodes, an analyst with the Congressional General Accounting Office, testified that the plume modeling the Department used to determine the number of troops who might have been exposed to low levels of chemical agents, as the result of the demolition of Iraqi weapons bunkers in the aftermath of the war, could not provide supportable conclusions.

After Rhodes’ testimony, Shays recounted the difficulty the Congress had in even getting the DoD to admit there might have been some exposures

in the first place. In short, he told Rhodes that “you’ve determined the plume modeling was irrelevant.” Rep. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) noted that after 241 Federally-funded studies, costing \$241 million, all the researchers have been able to come up with is the fact that there are symptoms. “I have concluded,” he said, “that something very strange is going on.”

### Rumsfeld Won’t Get His Blank Check

On June 2, Senate Appropriations Committee chairman Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) slammed the door shut on the Bush Administration’s desire for “complete flexibility” on the \$25 billion in supplemental money it is asking for, for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The original request, sent up on May 12, gave the Pentagon discretionary authority to spend the entire \$25 billion as it sees fit, although it says that the money “may” be spent on various items, including operations and maintenance expenses incurred by the military services. During the hearing, Stevens expressed the fear that the Democrats would look at the request and label it a “blank check.” He told the Bush Administration witnesses that “I don’t like the word ‘may.’ I’m going to change it to ‘shall’ use these funds for the designated purposes”; to which Sen. Robert Byrd (D-WV) expressed enthusiastic support. Lawrence Lanzilotta, the Pentagon’s acting comptroller, when pressed by both Stevens and Byrd, expressed no opposition to the change in wording.

Later the same day, the Senate adopted unanimously, as an amendment sponsored by Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John War-

ner (R-Va.), to the Fiscal Year 2005 Defense Authorization bill, language specifying where the money is to be spent. Only \$2.5 billion, or 10%, is available for transfer, as opposed to the entire amount. Byrd told the Senate that it should build on the Warner amendment “to insure that the appropriations bill includes similar provisions that preserve the power of the purse that resides with Congress.”

### Democrats Up the Heat On Cheney and Halliburton

While the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal may have pushed the name of Halliburton off the front pages, the company’s contracting in Iraq—and Vice President Dick Cheney’s connection to it—has not left the radar screens of prominent Democrats in the House. In fact, their concerns were further piqued by a report in *Time* magazine of an internal Pentagon e-mail that stated that “action” on the Halliburton oil reconstruction contract was “coordinated” with Cheney’s office. The *Time* report spurred two new letters to the Bush Administration on the matter.

Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), the ranking Democrat on the House Government Reform Committee, wrote to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on June 1, demanding information on who reviewed and signed off on the contract, awarded to Halliburton just days before the March 19, 2003 invasion; and all contacts between the Pentagon and the White House regarding that contract. Waxman wrote that the new information in the *Time* article “raises new questions about the testimony of senior Defense Department officials” before the Government Reform Committee during a

hearing on March 11. At that hearing, committee chairman Tom Davis (R-Va.) asked each of the witnesses, one of whom was then-Pentagon comptroller Dov Zakheim, if any of them had had any contact with Cheney before any contract was awarded, and they all answered “no.”

The following day, Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, sent a letter, signed by ten other Democrats, requesting that Attorney General John Ashcroft appoint a special prosecutor “to investigate whether Vice President Cheney violated Federal criminal laws through his involvement in the award of a sole-source, no-bid contract for Iraqi oil recovery to his former employer, Halliburton.” Conyers noted that Ashcroft’s failure to do so, up to now, creates the appearance that the Justice Department “has become politicized and is acting to avoid any independent scrutiny of wrongdoing by the Administration.” The law and the facts, Conyers wrote, “dictate that you take steps to appoint a special counsel.”

## Senate Debates Mini-Nukes and Bunker-Busters

During debate, on June 2, on the Fiscal 2005 Defense Authorization bill, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) introduced an amendment that would prohibit funding for programs related to research on low-yield nuclear weapons or on so-called bunker-buster bombs. Kennedy warned that the development of such weapons “weakens our ability to ask other countries to give up their nuclear programs.” He also argued that, in spite of claims to the contrary, the Bush Administration

has every intention of developing such weapons. “All we have to do is look at the five-year budget the Administration has submitted,” Kennedy said, to prove their intentions. That budget amounts to \$484 million for the bunker-buster and \$82 million for the low-yield weapon. He said that the Administration’s own timelines have these weapons moving towards development in 2007 and testing in 2009.

Sen. Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.) first countered that language in the Fiscal 2004 authorization act prevents the Administration from moving forward with development without the express permission of the Congress. Then he went on to argue for the military necessity of such weapons. He said the bunker-buster study is necessary to determine whether or not an existing nuclear weapon can be modified for use against deeply buried targets. “The current authorization will not result in a new of modified nuclear weapon,” he claimed.

A vote on the Kennedy amendment, as well as further debate on the underlying bill, were put off for a week for the funeral of former President Ronald Reagan, as was much other legislative business on Capitol Hill.

## Senate Votes Health Benefits for Reservists

On June 2, the Senate voted 75-20 to allow members of the National Guard and the reserves to buy into the military’s Tricare health insurance program, by adopting an amendment to the Fiscal 2005 Defense Authorization bill. The bill would allow them to join the program by paying monthly premiums when they are in a reserve status; and then, if they are activated, treat

them the same as active duty military members. Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-S.C.), who, along with Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), sponsored the amendment, noted that, under present circumstances, about 25% of reservists called to active duty are medically disqualified for deployment. Graham also reported that about 50% of the reservists in his home state do not have health insurance in the private sector, which causes further hardship for their families when they are activated and deployed.

Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John Warner (R-Va.), in opposing the amendment, complained that it would cost \$700 million in the first year and \$5.7 billion over five years. “We are talking about a very significant permanent entitlement for the reservists which is extremely costly,” he said. “From where do those dollars come?” He also argued that not only was the language already in the bill sufficient to take care of the reservists, but giving them Tricare benefits would also “make a very substantial closing of the gap” in benefits between the active duty force and the reserves,” giving people more incentive to join the reserves than the active duty military, from which they can not return to civilian life at the end of a deployment.

Graham shot back that “We are trying to spend \$1 billion a year for five years . . . and we are arguing about the money?” That, in spite of a \$400 billion annual defense budget and all the money already spent in Iraq. “This money is needed,” he said. Speaking to reporters after the vote, Graham argued that “When 25% of the people called to active duty are unable to fight, then the health care system making them ready for war is failing America.”