

## Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

### Senate Panel Passes Bipartisan Energy Bill

The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee pushed out, by a vote of 21 to 1, a bipartisan energy bill on May 26. The broad support in the committee for the bill resulted from a deliberate effort to avoid the partisan lightning rod issues that have held up passage of an energy bill for the past two Congresses. The comity on the committee was noted by ranking Democrat Jeff Bingaman (N.M.), who told reporters afterwards that during the five-day markup, "virtually every vote that occurred was spread all over the place." In other words, there were no party-line splits on any amendment.

Two of the provisions left out of the bill include liability protection for contamination caused by the gasoline additive MTBE and the repeal of the Public Utility Holding Company Act (PUHCA), both of which were included in the House bill passed, last April. Committee Chairman Pete Domenici (R-N.M.) noted, during a mark-up session on May 19, that "Senator Bingaman and I have not been able to agree on language to repeal" the PUHCA, so it was left out of the bill.

The bill also slows the charge towards deregulation of electricity, by prohibiting the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) from mandating that utilities join Regional Transmission Organizations. The bill includes increased penalties for violations of the Federal Power Act and a ban on market manipulation by electricity marketers. Both of those provisions were sponsored by Democrats. The bill also restricts FERC's authority with respect to the siting of liquefied natural gas plants by denying it "eminent domain authority," unlike the House bill which gives the agency unlimited authority over the siting of such plants.

Once it is passed by the full Senate, the energy bill faces a rough ride in conference with the House. Aside from the above-noted differences, the House bill also includes \$8 billion in tax breaks, most of which go to oil and gas interests closely tied to Vice President Dick Cheney. The Senate bill, on the other hand, puts the brakes on full-scale deregulation, something House negotiators are unlikely to accept.

### House Debates Exit Strategy for Iraq

For the first time since the invasion of Iraq in March of 2003, the House voted on whether or not the war should continue. The May 25 vote came on an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2006 defense authorization bill, sponsored by Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-Calif.), that would have expressed the sense of Congress that the Bush Administration should develop a plan for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Woolsey told the House that while she honors members of the military serving in Iraq, more than 1,600 of them have been killed in two years of war, more than 12,000 wounded, and an estimated 25,000 Iraqi civilians have also been killed. Between that and the more than \$200 billion Congress has appropriated for the war, "do the members [of the House] not think that the American people deserve to know what the President plans to do in Iraq?"

Woolsey's amendment was defeated by a vote of 300 to 128, based on arguments from the Republicans that such an amendment would "send the wrong message" to the terrorists in Iraq. Significantly, however, five Republicans voted for it, including Walter Jones (R-N.C.), who spoke in support of it on the House floor. Jones noted that two years ago, he was an

enthusiastic supporter of the war, but since that time, "I have been very disappointed in what I have learned about the justification for going into Iraq." He called on the Congress "to start the debate and discussion of what the exit strategy is of this government." The Congress has a responsibility, he said, and "we should not be into some endless, endless war in Iraq, when we have so many other countries that we need to be watching much more."

### Rangel Re-Introduces Bill on Military Draft

On May 26, Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) re-introduced legislation to reinstate the military draft. Rangel said that "what is happening now indicates to me that the entire volunteer system is in danger of collapse under the weight of the burden being placed on those who are serving." The legislation is, in part, a response to the growing crisis in military recruiting, especially in the Army, which has missed its monthly recruiting goals by as much as 30% every month since February.

Rangel noted that the Army's recent decision to allow recruits to sign up for as little as 15 months, plus training time, "shatters the myth of the volunteer military, while exposing the hypocrisy of the Pentagon's arguments" against the draft. The 15-month enlistment, along with sign-up bonuses of as much as \$30,000, are part of the Army's response to the drop in recruiting. The Army has also beefed up its force of recruiters and ordered a one-day recruiting stand-down on May 20, after allegations of abuse, in order to review the rules and regulations of recruiting.

Rangel also noted that the Penta-

gon has “only been able to keep troops in the field by extending deployments, calling back veterans who have previously served in combat, and placing an unsustainable burden on the Reserves.” He warned that these practices “have devastated the troops’ morale, made life more difficult for military families, and, in many cases, caused the loss of civilian jobs, homes, and even marriages.”

Rangel, who is a decorated Korean War veteran, originally introduced his bill in January 2003, when it generated a great deal of anger from neo-con pro-war circles. Rangel noted at the time, that most of those promoting the war policy against Iraq hadn’t “the slightest clue as to the pain of war, the sacrifice of war.”

## House Passes Defense Authorization Bill

On May 26, the House voted 390 to 39 to pass the Fiscal 2006 defense authorization bill. The \$441 billion bill authorizes funding for activities of the Defense Department as well as nuclear weapons activities of the Department of Energy. It also reflects the growing discontent in the Congress with the Bush Administration’s penchant for funding its wars with supplemental appropriations. In addition to the regular funding, it includes a “bridge fund” of \$50 billion, “which is intended to provide the resources necessary up front to allow our military to fight the war on terrorism,” in the words of Readiness Subcommittee Chairman Joel Hefley (R-Colo.)

The bill also does something else that the Bush Administration has resisted: It increases the size of the Army and the Marine Corps by 10,000 and 1,000 troops, respectively, bringing the total authorized increases in the

two services over the past three years to 30,000 soldiers and 4,000 Marines. It also authorizes enlistment and re-enlistment bonuses of up to \$30,000.

## Democrats Call for Select Committee on Abu Ghraib

The House Democratic leadership, Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) and Whip Steny Hoyer (Md.), and nine ranking committee members, including Henry Waxman (Calif.) of the House Government Reform Committee, and four others, announced on May 27 that they would be introducing legislation to establish a 14-member select committee to investigate the evidence of detainee abuse at U.S. prisons in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

“We first introduced this resolution a year ago after the Republican Majority refused repeated requests to investigate the accounts of prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib,” Waxman said. “Since then, the scope of the problem has exploded. Nearly every week brings new reports of horrific abuse of individuals in U.S. custody. Yet, there still has been no serious Congressional investigation.” Waxman called this lack of oversight “shameful.”

## House Debates Veterans’ Health-Care Funding

Veterans’ health care was at the center of debate when the House passed by a vote of 425 to 1, the Military Quality of Life and Veterans Affairs appropriations bill on May 26. The bill is one of the results of the realignment of the House Appropriations Committee, undertaken by Chairman Jerry Lewis (R-Calif.) at the beginning of the year.

It combines the old Military Construction function, military family housing, and the defense health program, with the Veterans Affairs budget, which used to be packaged with the budget for the Department of Housing and Urban Development. In the bill passed by the House, the Department of Veterans Affairs gets \$68.1 billion, including \$21 billion for health care, and the Defense Department gets \$53.5 billion, of which \$20 billion goes to the defense health program.

Military Quality of Life and Veterans Affairs appropriations Subcommittee Chairman James Walsh (R-N.Y.) pointed out that the Veterans Affairs portion of the bill does not assume the adoption of the increase in fees and co-pays for veterans’ health care that the Administration is demanding, nor does it preclude the Veterans Affairs Committee from moving on legislation to prohibit those fees. It also restores funding for long-term care to the Fiscal 2005 level, and it directs the Veterans Affairs Department to spend not less than \$2.2 billion on specialty mental health care in 2006.

Freshman Rep. Charlie Melancon (D-La.) offered an amendment that would have added \$169 million to various VA accounts, including \$53 million for programs that serve veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. He proposed paying for the increased funding by taking it out of accounts used for paying military base closing expenses, which was already reduced by \$310 million from the Bush Administration request. Walsh argued that taking the money out of base closing accounts would only free up about \$30 million and would further delay ongoing clean-up efforts at previously closed bases. Walsh barely prevailed, as Melancon’s amendment went down to defeat on a 214 to 213 vote.