

## Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

### Rep. Murtha Demands U.S. Withdraw From Iraq

Six months after he introduced his emergency resolution to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq because there was no plan to stabilize Iraq, and because U.S. troops were dying needlessly, Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), ranking member of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, held a press conference on May 17 to renew his demand. He said that nearly 350 more American troops have been killed in the last six months, with not one bit of improvement in the Administration's plan to either stabilize or leave Iraq.

Murtha derided Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's claim that progress had been made in Iraq because there are so many "satellite dish" antennas on rooftops. Murtha pointed out that Baghdad has fewer than three hours of electricity per day. What good are satellite dishes, asked Murtha, without electricity? What are Iraqi citizens doing for the 21 hours when they cannot turn on their TVs?

Murtha held his press conference while Rumsfeld was testifying about the Pentagon budget at the Senate Armed Services Committee. Rumsfeld, and the other witnesses he brought to the hearing, admitted in their testimony to the Senators that Iraq still doesn't have any self-sufficient military units.

### Senators Call for Diplomatic Solution on Iran

Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, stated as he opened hearings on May 17, that the "American policy in the near term will be defined by efforts to convince the international community of our commitment to diplomacy and to build a broad multilat-

eral and international coalition against Iran's nuclear ambitions." In a message to the Bush Administration, Senator Lugar said: "Analysts in our intelligence agencies and State Department do not regard Tehran as irrational, but the framework for their decision-making is different from our own. We must understand that they are interpreting our actions in ways that we do not always discern. . . ."

The ranking Democrat, Joe Biden (D-Del.), pointed out that "unfortunately, the Administration has chosen not to send a senior official to be a part of these hearings. That is a mistake." He said President Bush should write to the man who has the final say in Iran—Ayatollah Khamenei—calling for direct talks.

### Defense Bill Draws Veto Threat

On May 11, the House voted 396 to 31 to pass the Fiscal 2007 defense authorization bill, after two days of debate on the bill and amendments. The bill authorizes \$512.9 billion for the Defense Department and military programs of the Energy Department, adds 30,000 troops to the Army and 5,000 to the Marines that were not requested by the Bush Administration, provides a "bridge" fund of \$50 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and adds \$100 million more than the Administration asked for, for programs to defeat improvised explosive devices in Iraq. It also brings National Guard and Reserve personnel and their families fully into the Tricare health care system.

While the White House has stated its opposition to all of those provisions, the veto threat issued by the White House is aimed at "Buy America" provisions, intended to protect American manufacturing jobs in the defense industry, sponsored by

House Armed Services Committee chairman Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.). The White House issued a statement saying that Hunter's measure would prohibit the Pentagon from buying "virtually any foreign-made commercial items, components or materials, such as information technology products, commercial aircraft, and commercial aircraft engines."

While the bill itself attracted little controversy, Democrats attacked the House GOP leadership for blocking a number of Democratic amendments from consideration. One of those amendments, by Rep. Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), the ranking Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, would have blocked increased prescription drug co-pays for beneficiaries in the Tricare system, which are otherwise provided for in the bill. Another amendment, co-sponsored by Representatives John Tierney (D-Mass.) and Jim Leach (R-Ia.), would have created a commission to investigate fraud and corruption in Iraq contracting.

### Democrats Introduce Mine Safety Legislation

More than four months after the Sago, West Virginia mine disaster, which killed 12 miners on Jan. 2, 2006, legislation to address mine safety concerns appears finally to be on the move. Just hours after Representatives George Miller (D-Calif.) and Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.) announced they would be unveiling a new bill, Rep. Charles Norwood (R-Ga.), the chairman of the Workforce Subcommittee of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, announced that he will introduce legislation by Memorial Day. At the same time, Senators Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) and Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va.) are in negotiations with the chairman of the Health, Education,

Labor, and Pensions Committee, Mike Enzi (R-Ore.), for a bill in the Senate.

Miller and Rahall's bill would improve safety standards in mines, improve mine rescue teams, require uniform rules for mine accident investigations, increase penalties against mine operators who break the law, and correct specific hazards in mines, among other provisions. Miller and Rahall told reporters on May 16 that the bill builds on earlier legislation that Rahall introduced, with the rest of the West Virginia Congressional delegation, on Feb. 1, but on which no action was ever taken. Both of them credited the families of the miners who died, with pushing the issue of mine safety until it could no longer be ignored.

Norwood had held two hearings in March, but Democrats say those hearings were not comprehensive, in part, because the families of the miners killed were not allowed to testify. In making his announcement on May 15, Norwood said, "From the evidence gathered, it is now apparent that reform legislation is needed to help address the situations that led to these disasters. . . ." Rahall said he was "heartened" by Norwood's "sudden announcement" that he intends to turn his attention to legislation this month, though he thought it was "interesting," that Norwood's announcement came after Miller and Rahall had announced they would be introducing their own legislation.

## Senate Bill To Waive Senior Drug Penalty

On May 16, Senate Finance Committee chairman Charles Grassley (R-Ia.), and Senators Max Baucus (D-Mont.), Mike Dewine (R-Ohio), and Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) announced they would be introducing legislation to waive the enrollment penalty for Medicare bene-

ficiaries who failed to enroll in the Medicare drug plan by May 15. The penalty would increase their premium 1% per month until they do enroll, adding up to a 7% lifetime penalty if they sign up during the next enrollment period beginning Nov. 15. Grassley told reporters that the just-ended enrollment period was "very successful," and "We can help more seniors choose to sign up by waiving the enrollment penalty and enhancing outreach." He admitted that it takes time for people to learn about a new program, but the more people who sign up for the drug benefit, "the better for both the strength of the program and, more importantly, the seniors' quality of life."

Baucus had a different take on the program, reflecting Democratic criticisms since the program began on Jan. 1. The Bush Administration, he said, "made the program . . . needlessly complicated by approving too many different benefit packages to sort through," and therefore, "it's time to cut seniors a little bit of slack." Otherwise, he said that the program is working pretty well. But there are a lot of kinks left to be worked out."

Democrats in the House, who still vehemently oppose the legislation that created the program, had tried to extend the May 15 deadline in order to give senior citizens more time to consider their options, but the House Republican leadership refused to consider any legislation to do that.

## Bill Introduced To Pull FEMA Out of DHS

With the Hurricane Katrina investigations in the House and the Senate concluded, debate has now turned to how to re-organize Federal emergency response so that it actually functions. In the House, Transportation and Infrastructure Committee chairman Don Young (R-Ak.), House Government

Reform Committee chairman Tom Davis (R-Va.), James Oberstar (D-Minn.), and three others, have introduced a bill to take the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) out of the Department of Homeland Security and make it an independent, Cabinet-level agency, much as it was during the Clinton Administration.

Davis told reporters, on May 9, that his special investigation of the Federal response to Katrina raised questions about the incorporation of FEMA into DHS. "FEMA was steadily bled to death by its new siblings and a parent organization that focussed on terrorism." He said that "FEMA worked well when it was properly staffed, when it was capably led and adequately resourced under its own management. . . . An independent, Cabinet-level FEMA will bring clarity and focus year round to Federal emergency responses. There can be no questions of who's in charge, to whom the President looks to coordinate Federal actions to support state and local responders." Rep. Bill Shuster (R-Pa.), who was a member of Davis's special committee, noted that not only did FEMA suffer a "massive brain drain" under DHS, but "DHS made it worse by transferring programs and personnel out of FEMA to other parts of the department."

In addition to making FEMA an independent agency, the bill would also establish a fixed five-year term for the FEMA director, establish qualifications for that position, and subject him to Senate confirmation. Young said that FEMA "has to have the authority to make calls without going through this whole process, have in place the response teams," without going through the DHS bureaucracy. "Right now, they don't have that," he said. "What if we had an earthquake," he later added. "There's nobody that can respond to that under the present system."