

UPDATE

Backgroundunder

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DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION BILL: THE NEED FOR A VETO STRATEGY

(Updating *Executive Memorandum* No. 243, "Congress's SDI Cuts Deserve A Bush Veto," July 19, 1989.)

Later this month, a House-Senate conference committee will meet to hammer out the final version of the fiscal 1990 Defense Authorization Bill. House members will bring to the table a bill that cripples such important programs as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), the B-2 bomber, and the MX missile, while restoring funding to such marginal programs as the F-14D jet fighter, which the Administration sought to cancel. By contrast the Senate members bring to the table a bill that includes more funds for the SDI program, protects the MX missile and B-2 bomber programs, and cancels the F-14D fighter program. The Bush Administration can help the Republican and Democratic members of the Senate team of the conference by threatening to veto a bill that does not reflect closely the Senate priorities. The White House should work with conferees from the Senate, notably Sam Nunn, the Georgia Democrat, to protect the SDI, B-2, and MX programs.

The House Defense Authorization Bill, which passed July 27, undermines United States security in several areas. It slashes the SDI budget to \$3.1 billion, down from the Administration's request of \$4.9 billion; eliminates from the MX missile program \$174 million for research and development, \$164 million for components such as railcars and communications equipment, \$59 million for spare parts, and \$105 million for construction of buildings and facilities; cuts \$1 billion from the B-2 "Stealth" bomber program and eliminates future procurement funds for the program if its size and cost are not reduced. The purpose of these House actions appears to be to restrict SDI to research, bar MX deployment on railcars, and declare the B-2 program unaffordable. The House backing of the F-14D jet fighter program, meanwhile, is opposed by Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, who argues that it is prudent to invest in more advanced fighters such as the F/A-18 *Hornet* and the Advanced Tactical Aircraft (ATA). The House bill essentially would leave the Bush defense policy in tatters and ultimately undermine U.S. nuclear deterrence.

Far Preferable Bill. The Senate bill, by contrast, funds the SDI program at \$4.5 billion, fully funds the MX missile and B-2 bomber programs, and cancels the F-14D program. This makes its bill far preferable to the House bill. The SDI program will end the near complete U.S. vulnerability to a nuclear missile attack. The proposal to deploy the MX missile on railcars will ensure the survivability of at least a portion of the U.S. land-based missile force against a Soviet first strike. The B-2 bomber is essential to maintaining a U.S. strategic bomber force capable of penetrating Soviet airspace into the next century. The F-14D, while a capable aircraft for meeting today's needs, will not provide tactical air superiority for the Navy as well as will the F/A-18 *Hornet* and the proposed Advanced Tactical Aircraft (ATA).

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Defense spending levels were set earlier this year at \$305 billion in the now famous Administration-Congress budget accord. Therefore, there is no dispute over how much the U.S. is spending on defense, but over the specific programs to be funded. The Congress is often tempted to micromanage the defense budget. The House bill typifies the sort of congressional micromanagement of the defense budget that ultimately undermines the national security. The congressional temptation to micromanage is greatest when parochial interests are at stake. The F-14D program was preserved, in large measure, because of such interests.

The White House can influence the decision of the House-Senate conference committee. To do this, George Bush first must threaten to veto a defense bill unless it meets minimum standards that include:

- ◆ ◆ \$4.2 billion for SDI;
- ◆ ◆ the Senate position on the B-2 bomber, which, unlike the House bill, will not require a reduction in the overall size and budget of the program;
- ◆ ◆ \$328 million in procurement funds to deploy the MX missile on railcars;
- ◆ ◆ cancellation of the F-14D.

Test of Leadership. Bush too must work with responsible Democratic members of the conference from the Senate, particularly Georgia's Nunn, so that they will argue the Administration's case during the conference deliberations. Vice President Dan Quayle met with Nunn on July 27 to discuss the actions taken by the House on the defense bill. Bush should keep open this channel of communication with Nunn and request that the Senate insist on its position where there is serious disagreement with the House.

Defense Secretary Cheney hinted that a veto of the Defense Authorization Bill is possible in his August 23 speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Bush should now come forward and publicly back the Cheney statements.

Bush's ability to sustain his defense policies in the upcoming congressional conference tests his leadership. He can salvage his defense program in conference if he shows that he is prepared to fight for what he wants. For this he must be prepared to veto the defense bill if it fails to meet his minimum requirements to protect the nation.

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