

After a year and a half of waiting, last week's news that Northrop Grumman was unable to submit a bid in the Air Force's \$35 billion aerial tanker contract shook the Gulf Coast like an earthquake.

While our community had been prepared for the possibility Northrop would be forced to abstain from the tanker competition due to an unlevel playing field, the outcome was still deeply disappointing.

Northrop Grumman made clear on December 2, 2009, that it could be forced to walk away from making a tanker bid unless the Pentagon fixed its fundamentally flawed draft requirements for the new aircraft.

As far back as late October, Governor Riley and the Alabama congressional delegation called on the Defense Department to substantially rewrite its tanker "request for proposal" (RFP) to ensure it was not skewed in favor of one particular bidder.

Unfortunately, despite repeated calls for a fair RFP, the Pentagon simply dug in its heels and refused to make more than superficial alterations to the draft RFP.

The implications of Northrop Grumman's inability to bid on the massive new contract go beyond local jobs. The Defense Department has deliberately engineered a federal no-bid contract that could be unprecedented in its size. This sets the stage for more such noncompetitive awards which rob our military of the most capable weapons systems, while also denying the best value for our taxpayers' investment.

In 2008, candidate Barack Obama called for change in government, including ensuring "that federal contracts over \$25,000 are competitively bid." Furthermore, on March 4, 2009, President Obama issued a memorandum ordering his agency chiefs to avoid no-bid federal contracts. Given these facts, it simply boggles the mind how the Department of Defense could turn around and effectively award a \$35 billion sole source contract a year later.

I wrote President Obama on February 5, asking him to intervene in the competition to guarantee fairness. I also voiced support for an alternative approach – a dual source award where both contractors could share in the construction of the new tankers.

As I told the president, "A dual contract would quickly put 100,000 Americans to work, save the taxpayers at least \$45 billion... maintain annual competition, and replace the 50 plus year-old tanker fleet in about half the time."

The Northrop Grumman/EADS team has made it clear that it cannot effectively compete under the Pentagon's current tanker contract terms which favor their competition.

It's time for the President of the United States to stand up and put his pledge to end noncompetitive federal contracts into action by stopping what will likely be the largest federal sole source contract award ever. The ball is in your court, Mr. President.

Assessing Military Progress in Afghanistan:

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit our men and women in uniform who are fighting the war against terrorism in Afghanistan. The early March trip allowed me, and other Members of Congress, to personally get an assessment of the U.S. operations in what is now the front line in the battle against Al Qaeda and their Taliban supporters.

This was my second opportunity to witness the progress U.S. forces are making in Afghanistan. In February of 2009, I first traveled to that South Central Asian nation, venturing out to a camp in the southern portion of the country which borders Pakistan.

On this trip, I traveled to the Afghan capital of Kabul, and met with General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, as well as U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry. General McChrystal briefed our delegation on the status of the 30,000 troop surge which was approved by President Obama on December 1, 2009.

General McChrystal noted the surge is only just beginning and the coming months will be critical as our expanded force goes after terrorists, and begins to clear space for the Afghan government to operate.

I was also given an opportunity to visit with Alabama troops stationed in the capital – presenting them with Alabama and Auburn t-shirts and thanking them for their service to our country.

Our trip concluded with a stop in Islamabad, Pakistan, where we met with the Pakistani secretary of defense and U.S. officials. Pakistan is a major U.S. ally against Al Qaeda and their government is under increasing international pressure to locate terrorists hiding within their borders.

The men and women of our military are absolutely dedicated to the success of their mission, which is to protect us. We, in return, must continue to give them the tools and support they need to get the job done.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.