

This Week in Washington



WITH CONGRESSMAN
JO BONNER

Pentagon Reaffirms Commitment to LCS and Tanker

Last week, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates outlined his recommendations for the fiscal year 2010 defense budget.

In what the secretary described as an “unorthodox approach,” he announced the department’s request before the president submits his to Congress.

These recommendations essentially reshape the priorities of our nation’s defense. The sad truth is that the current budget woefully underfunds our nation’s defense; and therefore, the Pentagon was forced to make difficult decisions.

Secretary Gates did make clear that the two most important weapons systems to the economy of south Alabama – the Navy’s Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) and the next generation of the Air

Force's aerial refueling tanker fleet – remain priorities of the Pentagon.

The secretary recognized the transformational power of LCS in addressing new threats throughout the world today. As you may know, the LCS is a brand new class of fast, highly maneuverable ship designed to carry the fight to the enemy in areas close to shore.

Secretary Gates indicated that the Navy will order three of the ships in fiscal year 2010 with the eventual goal of acquiring 55.

The secretary also expressed his commitment for the aerial refueling tanker and recognized the importance of tankers in projecting power around the globe.

The Pentagon, he said, will maintain the “schedule and funding” for the tanker with a goal of soliciting new bids this summer. In my view, the summer is not soon enough—this program has already dragged on for far too long.

As you will recall, in February of last year, the Air Force determined that the Northrop Grumman/EADS team offered the best aircraft—more modern, more capable, and more fuel efficient than the Boeing aircraft.

That competition was the second attempt by the Air Force to procure a tanker after the first deal with Boeing ultimately imploded as a result of illegal dealings.

Boeing protested the award, and last June, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) noted procedural errors in the source selection process. GAO determined that eight complaints – out of 111 – warranted a review of the contract award.

Then in a stunning turn of events, early last fall – in the closing weeks of the presidential campaigns – the secretary cancelled the tanker replacement competition until the new administration was in place.

At this point, I share the concern of many in Congress about the Pentagon's ability to get this program moving forward. I am actively working with my Congressional colleagues and the Pentagon to make sure the way forward is fair and has a reasonable chance of avoiding another round of protests.

Likewise, I am cautiously encouraged the Pentagon is now expecting to solicit bids, once again, this summer. However, it is has been eight long years since the Air Force first initiated its program to replace the KC-135 fleet.

Eight years and, to date, our airmen still have nothing to show for it.

The average age of this Eisenhower-era fleet is 48 years old. In fact, many have been flying longer than I have been alive.

It is past time to provide the best, most capable aircraft to our men and women in uniform. They deserve no less.

President Makes First Official Travel Abroad

President Barack Obama just completed a whirlwind eight day trip in which he logged 12,500 miles, visited six countries, and had private meetings with 19 world leaders and dignitaries.

As the president's trip came to a close a CBS/New York Times survey was released showing that while Americans approve of the president and believe he is respected throughout the world, more than half of those surveyed do not believe the United States is respected by other countries.

With lofty goals – ending the global recession, eradicating the threat of nuclear weapons, achieving peace in the Middle East, and restoring America's image in the Muslim world – the concrete achievements of his maiden overseas voyage will be debated for weeks and months to come.

The president used a surprise stop in Baghdad as his first opportunity to visit a war zone as commander in chief.

Judging from the cheering audience that greeted the president at one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces, the stop was a huge morale booster to the troops.

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 or visit my website at <http://bonner.house.gov>.

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For release the week of Monday, April 13, 2009. For more information please contact Mike Lewis at (202)225-4931.