

This Week in Washington



WITH CONGRESSMAN
JO BONNER

Pentagon Cancels Tanker Competition

In a stunning announcement last week, the Department of Defense (DoD) notified Congress and the two competing contractors, Northrop Grumman and Boeing, that it was terminating the U.S. Air Force tanker replacement competition.

This is outrageous, and I cannot begin to express how angry and disappointed I am that DoD would cancel this competition.

It has been seven years since the Air Force initiated its program to replace the KC-135 fleet. Seven even years and, to date, our airmen have nothing to show for it.

Keep in mind this 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.

In February, the Air Force determined the Northrop Grumman offering to be the better aircraft – more modern and more fuel efficient than the Boeing offering.

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

In light of GAO's announcement, Defense Secretary Robert Gates took control of the procurement process and announced an expedited re-competition of the tanker contract with an award expected by the end of the year.

The United States currently has a 50 year old aircraft fleet, and the Air Force has declared the replacement of this antiquated fleet its top priority. However, now there are no viable plans to replace it.

By canceling the tanker replacement program, DoD is scrapping all the work that has been done by all parties since April 2006 and is essentially declaring the project "too hard to do." This is absolutely bewildering.

The secretary says his decision was necessary because DoD could not make an award before the end of the current presidential administration. My friends, that is flawed thinking.

Competitions should be non-political processes carried out by the career professionals in the military. They frequently bridge presidential administrations.

Frankly, I am embarrassed for DoD leadership. They have an urgent military need yet are simply giving up efforts to address that critical need.

At a time when our nation is engaged in two wars – in two different regions of the world – the DoD has chosen to abdicate its responsibility and punt this vital program into the next administration.

On September 7th, alone, it was reported that the Air Force and coalition tanker crews flew 45 missions and off-loaded approximately 3.2 million pounds of fuel to 180 receiving aircraft.

This type activity is occurring every day, and yet, we are now left with the numbing decision to continue flying the tankers built when Dwight Eisenhower was president.

Along the Gulf Coast, people are often told to "fish or cut bait." DoD has been cutting bait far too long on this program.

Imagine what the men and women of our military must be thinking right now.

Mobile Says Goodbye to Judge Hand

Last week, over 1,000 people filled Mobile's Dauphin Way Methodist Church to say goodbye to one of the city's favorite sons, Senior U.S. District Judge William Brevard Hand.

Mobile's Press-Register remembered Judge Hand as "a fair, thoughtful and tough jurist who did not shy away from high profile cases that might upset the powers-that-be."

Certainly, one of the high profile cases for which history will most remember him was his courageous ruling in favor of classroom prayer.

President Richard Nixon appointed him to the federal bench in 1971, and incredibly, he was active in cases as recently as last month.

I had the privilege of visiting with Judge Hand just last month at the courthouse, and there is no other judge who has served with greater dignity and compassion.

At Judge Hand's memorial service, Rev. Stephen F. Dill, pastor emeritus of the church said, "His friendship reached across the boundaries of wealth and status."

The Rev. Gorman Houston III, senior pastor at Dauphin Way, provided a poignant tribute, noting

"How grateful we are for the life of William Brevard Hand."

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.

--30--

*For release the week of Monday, September 15, 2008. For more information
please contact Mike Lewis at (202)225-4931.*