

This Week in Washington



WITH CONGRESSMAN
JO BONNER

Tanker Rhetoric Remains Intense

There has been a lot of conversation in Washington – some of it rather heated – since the Air Force’s decision on February 29 that Northrop Grumman would build America’s new refueling tanker, the KC-45.

The level of intensity following this announcement is, in many ways, understandable. As Americans, we are highly competitive by nature.

You never enter a competition with any goal short of winning, and win we did.

As you know, Mobile has been selected to be the site of two new manufacturing facilities that will employ at least 1,500 people and support 5,000 jobs throughout a tri-state area. Brookley Field, shuttered in 1964, will once again come alive with the sound of rivet guns in the cause of our national defense.

In addition to KC-45 production, Mobile has been tapped to produce another large commercial aircraft (the freighter version of the Airbus A-330-200), employing at least 20,000 workers nationwide.

Mobile will become only the third city in the world capable of producing large, wide-bodied commercial aircraft.

On the other hand, cities in Washington state and Kansas have been at the center of all-things-tanker for the past 50 years. The so-called "experts" were saying – literally up until the announcement was made – that Boeing was the prohibitive favorite in the competition.

The shock, angst and outrage over losing are understandable. The desire to appeal the decision was natural, and Boeing exercised its option to lodge a formal protest which is now pending before the General Accountability Office (GAO).

During this protest period, the Air Force has suspended all work on the tanker contract.

The GAO is the proper forum to which to appeal. They serve as the impartial arbiter of all protests of Department of Defense (DoD) contract awards.

This is the well-respected process that ensures integrity and fairness in DoD's competitive source selections. The GAO is expected to issue its ruling by June 19, 2008.

Unfortunately, in recent days, some Members of Congress have said that the GAO ruling doesn't really matter. One Member said, "We hope the GAO decision comes out, but regardless of that, Congress has a responsibility to correct one of the worst decisions in modern history."

Another Member of Congress appears to be intent on trying to disqualify the winning bidder and on ordering the Pentagon to conduct a new competition, effectively allowing only one company (Boeing) to compete. This would be nothing short of writing a sole-source contract to one company.

If there is no competition, rest assured both the American taxpayer and the American warfighter stand to be the biggest losers. Regretfully, there are those who are willing to throw out the longstanding, credible system of defense procurement, simply to reverse the outcome of a single contract.

Clearly, senior DoD officials are troubled. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said last week:

"All I can say is that I think it would be a real shame if the tankers were to get delayed".

"Based on everything I've seen this was a fair process but we'll wait and see what the GAO report says".

"But, I think that some things unrelated to what the law says we can consider are being thrown into the mix at least on Capitol Hill and that's a concern."

Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition John Young warned of "slippery slopes and dangerous precedents." He cautioned:

"It is going to be dangerous to set aside valid source selections on a political basis. Do we have the California delegation kill a program because the Georgia delegation won?"

I don't know where this stops.

"If I am going to demand that certain companies or proposals must win regardless of what they cost, I am going to disadvantage the taxpayer and the warfighter. I am going to deliver (a weapon with) less capability for more cost."

And Dr. Jacques Gansler, Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition in the Clinton Administration, said about the situation:

"[This] is a test for the United States in the sense that we cannot go back 100 years or more to allow our Congress to be making procurement decisions for the government. We got rid of that process and it has to be not returned.

This is a real test of the U.S. Congress and of our procurement process, I think, for the future."

Our warfighters need a new tanker to replace the 48 year-old fleet they now fly. A team of 150 certified acquisition professionals and aviators spent 14 months poring over 36,000 pages of technical detail and determined the Northrop Grumman aircraft best met its needs.

The GAO is currently validating the integrity and fairness of the decision process. We should avoid the slippery slope of which Secretary Young warns and let the longstanding process yield the final word.

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.

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For release the week of Monday, April 28, 2008. For more information please contact Mike Lewis at (202)225-4931.