

Senate Approves Spending Bill; \$81 Billion to Finance Wars, Baghdad Embassy

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Body

The Senate unanimously approved yesterday an \$81 billion bill to finance the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, provide relief to Asian tsunami victims and construct a massive embassy in Baghdad.

The legislation now faces negotiations with the House that promise to be prickly.

The core of the measure -- about \$75 billion for military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan -- has generated no controversy. That sum will push war and reconstruction costs since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks to more than \$300 billion, according to the Congressional Research Service. The cost of the Iraq war alone is approaching \$200 billion.

But House and Senate negotiators will have to battle over several contentious side issues, such as extraneous provisions on immigration that reveal very different priorities. The Senate voted Tuesday night to expand the availability of employment visas for skilled workers, such as nurses and engineers, and to relax rules governing temporary visas for lower-skilled guest workers to allow about 35,000 more into the country this year.

In contrast, the House last month took a get-tough approach to immigration on its version of the war spending bill, voting to deny driver's licenses to illegal immigrants, tighten rules for asylum seekers and bolster a fence along the California-Mexico border.

Other points of contention will be the Bush administration's planned Baghdad embassy, which the House refused to fund, planned cuts to weapons programs that the Senate moved to block, and various home-state projects that have raised the ire of fiscal conservatives.

In February, President Bush unveiled his \$82 billion war request for the current fiscal year, a request that came on top of \$25 billion in war funding already appropriated for 2005. The White House expects that request to push this year's budget deficit to \$427 billion, a record in dollar terms. So far, Bush has gotten largely what he wanted.

But the House sliced the White House's \$658 million embassy construction request to \$592 million and then voted to prohibit any money from being used for embassy construction and security. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice appealed to Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), who included \$592 million for the embassy and beat back efforts by some conservatives to strip it out.

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The **Senate** did, however, challenge other administration priorities. Senators blocked Pentagon plans to mothball the aircraft carrier USS John F. Kennedy and to cut 63 next-generation C-130J transport planes. Those moves would have saved more than \$6 **billion**, as part of a \$30 **billion** package of weapons savings over six years.

The moves did not surprise defense analysts. Air Force and Army officials had signaled that the C-130 cuts would jeopardize the military's ability to transport its next generation of armored vehicles. When Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld failed to discipline the service officials, lawmakers saw no reason not to act in their parochial interests, said Michael E. O'Hanlon, a defense budget analyst at the Brookings Institution. Measured against deficits of hundreds of **billions** a year and continued tax cutting, the small savings from weapons-systems cuts hardly seem worth the political price, he said.

"With all due respect to President Bush, who usually says what he believes and believes what he says, his deficit reduction is a bit of a charade," O'Hanlon said. "He has done nothing to encourage shared sacrifice."

The **Senate** also voted yesterday to add \$213 million for procurement of armored Humvees over protests from **Senate** Armed Services Committee Chairman John W. Warner (R-Va.) that the military had enough. Senators then boosted border protection funds by \$147 million. They also boosted funds for severely injured soldiers and death benefits for soldiers killed in noncombat accidents.

Republican leaders have struggled to hold down the size of the **spending** measure. One of their own, **Senate** Republican Conference Chairman Rick Santorum (Pa.), inserted a federal loan guarantee to pave the way for the nation's first plant to transform coal waste to diesel fuel and electricity, in Gilberton, Pa. Another measure would facilitate construction of a high-speed marine cargo terminal in Philadelphia.

"At a time when our soldiers are risking their lives in defense of freedom, members of Congress should have the courage to take political risks to oppose egregious and reckless **spending**," said Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.).

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