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House Passes War Spending Bill. Senate to Vote this Week

After reaching a compromise with the Bush Administration, the House passed the emergency supplemental spending bill last week ending weeks of intense negotiations on the legislation.

The House voted on two separate amendments, one for the Department of Defense and another for domestic priorities. The first vote provided the funding for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and passed 268-155. The second vote on domestic issues passed 416-12 and included the AUSA-supported expanded education benefits for veterans and a transferability clause requested by the White House that would allow veterans to transfer half of their benefits to a family member after six years of service and all their benefits after 10 years, another long-time AUSA goal.

Highlights of the bill include:

War Funding

--\$161.8 billion to cover the costs of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan through the summer of 2009.

Domestic Spending

--Veterans' education benefits. Expands GI Bill benefits for service members who have served on active duty since Sept. 11, 2001. That portion of the bill will cost \$62.8 billion over 11 years.

--Unemployment benefits. Extends federal unemployment benefits by up to 13 weeks for workers who have exhausted their current benefits.

--Medicaid. Places a moratorium on six Medicaid regulations that would narrow some services to seniors, families and people with disabilities and would cut payments to providers.

--Disaster Aid. Would provide \$5.8 billion to strengthen New Orleans levees and \$2.7 billion for relief from floods and tornadoes in the Midwest.

--Military construction, veterans' health. Would provide \$4.6 billion for military construction, veterans' and military hospitals.

Iraq Policy Provisions

--Reconstruction. Requires that the State Department or USAID reconstruction aid be matched dollar-for-dollar by the Iraqi government.

--Permanent bases. Prohibits the use of military construction funds to establish permanent bases in Iraq.

The Senate is expected to vote on the measure this week.

Although Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said he was optimistic about the bill's passage in the Senate, he said there were no guarantees. "I'm not a dictator over here. And I'm going to meet with my caucus and we'll decide what we're going to do." However, many Democrats in the Senate said they would fall in line and allow the bill to clear without much objection.

What about the Rest of the Defense Bills?

Now that the critical war funding bill is (hopefully) on its way to completion, what about the rest of the defense-related bills? Here is a rundown.

Fiscal 2009 Defense Authorization Bill. The House voted on their portion of the defense authorization bill on May 22. The bill bars any TRICARE or pharmacy fee increases for fiscal 2009; authorizes a 3.9 percent pay raise for 2009; requires a reduction in TRICARE Reserve Select premiums; expands eligibility for Special Survivor Indemnity Allowance to include survivors of members who died on active duty; adds \$8.6 billion for Army equipment reset and \$1.8 billion for Marine Corps reset; adds \$800 million more than the President's request for procurement of National Guard and Reserve equipment and directs nearly \$2 billion towards unfunded readiness initiatives requested by the services.

The Senate's version was passed by the Armed Services Committee on May 1. It was expected that the measure would reach the full floor this month; however, because of the war funding bill, it now appears that the floor vote will slip into July after Congress returns from its July 4 recess. The Senate's version includes many of the same provisions as the House-passed bill. If passed by the full Senate, it would also bar any increases in TRICARE fees and would authorize a 3.9 percent pay raise for military personnel.

Fiscal 2009 Defense Appropriations Bill. The fate of the defense appropriations bill is up in the air. Key lawmakers on both sides of the aisle are resigned to the idea that most, if not all, of the 12 appropriations bills will be settled with a continuing resolution that would expire after the November elections. AUSA would like to see Congress pass a bill that President Bush will sign before the elections. However, we are not optimistic.

Although the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii and Ranking Member Ted Stevens, R-Alaska believe the defense bill will be the most likely to pass individually, their counterpart in the House is not so confident. Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., said that there is only a 50-50 chance of the bill passing before the elections.

Fiscal 2009 Military Construction/VA Appropriation Bill. The fate of this bill mirrors the defense appropriations bill in that it will probably be included in a continuing resolution. The House Appropriations Military Construction/Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee marked its version of the bill on June 12. The full committee's mark up and vote will be held tomorrow, June 24. The Senate Appropriations Military Construction/Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee markup is scheduled for July 17.