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From: "Christiansen, Dane" <christiansen@hmcw.org>

To: "Mary Langman" <mlaedo2@mlahq.org>

Cc: "Dirks, Dale" <ddirks@hmcw.org>

Bush Warns He Would Veto a Combined Spending Package

By Edward Epstein and David Clarke, CQ Staff

President Bush excoriated the Democratic Congress Tuesday for "not getting its work done" and warned that he would veto any fiscal 2008 appropriations package that combines defense and veterans' spending with domestic funding he considers excessive.

Democrats have made no decisions yet but have discussed sending Bush a three-bill package that would include the Defense appropriations bill (HR 3222), the Military Construction-VA measure (HR 2642) and the Labor-HHS-Education bill (HR 3043). Bush has threatened to veto the huge Labor-HHS-Education measure, the largest of the 12 annual spending bills, even as he has urged Congress to speed the Defense and Milcon-VA measures to his desk.

"It's hard to imagine a more cynical political strategy than trying to hold hostage funding for our troops in combat and our wounded warriors in order to extract \$11 billion in additional social spending," Bush said after a meeting with House Republican leaders at the White House. He said that "if the reports of this strategy are true, I will veto such a three-bill pileup. Congress should pass each bill one at a time in a fiscally responsible manner that reflects agreement between the legislative branch and the executive branch."

The president again urged lawmakers to send him the bill funding the Department of Veterans Affairs by Veterans Day, Nov. 11, and to act quickly on a supplemental spending bill for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Bush is seeking close to \$200 billion to wage the wars during fiscal 2008.

"I know some on the Democrat side didn't agree with my decision to send troops in, but it seems like we ought to be able to agree that we're going to support our troops who are in harm's way," he said.

It was the second time in less than a week that Bush has gone after the Democratic-led Congress. Last Friday, he delivered a similar verbal assault at the White House. Both then and again on Tuesday, he pointed out that Congress has failed to send him a single one of the 12 annual appropriations bills, breaking a 20-year record for delay.

The entire federal government is currently operating under a continuing appropriations resolution (H J Res 52 - PL 110-920) that expires Nov. 16.

"Congress is not getting its work done. We're near the end of the year and there really isn't much to show for it," he said.

Democrats fired back. House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer,

D-Md., said in a statement, The fight over 2008 appropriations bills is not a fight over spending. It is a fight over priorities. The president wants to slash funding for education, medical research, cops on the beat and other key priorities, while spending another \$200 billion on his failing policy in Iraq – none of which is paid for, all of which would be added to the deficit.”

And Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., in remarks on the Senate floor shortly after Bush spoke, seemed unmoved by the president’s latest veto threat.

He promised only that Congress would send “an appropriations bill to the president” sometime before Nov. 16, when the current continuing appropriations resolution expires, in order to “get that process started.” Reid added, “Some say that no matter what we send him, he’s going to veto it, and that may be the case, I don’t know.”

He also sounded somewhat plaintive about the challenges of managing the narrowly divided Senate in an era of intense partisanship. “It’s really difficult to do . . . when you’re right in the trenches, sometimes it’s very very difficult,” he said.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and House Minority Leader John A. Boehner, R-Ohio, echoed Bush’s demand that lawmakers send “clean” Milcon-VA and Defense appropriations bills to Bush by Veterans Day. “It’s the least this Congress can do for those who’ve worn the uniform,” McConnell said. “And it’s the least this Congress can do to meet the minimum threshold of conducting the government’s important business.”

War Funding

House and Senate Democratic leaders have not decided how to deal with funding for the war in Iraq once the continuing resolution runs out. That measure provided roughly \$9 billion for the ongoing war operations.

Defense appropriators have been considering providing \$50 to \$75 billion more - a “bridge fund” - as part of the Defense appropriations bill. This would allow war operations to continue while Democrats and the president gear up for a renewed fight over war policy early next year.

But that now appears unlikely.

“Both leaderships, as I understand it, don’t want a bridge fund,” said House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee Chairman John P. Murtha, D-Pa.

Murtha met Tuesday morning with his Senate counterpart Daniel K. Inouye, D-Hawaii, and with the lead Republican Defense appropriators: Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, and Rep. C.W. Bill Young, R-Fla.

If war funding was included in a three-bill package, Democrats in the House Out of Iraq caucus could vote against the entire measure, jeopardizing its passage. They oppose any additional funding for Iraq if it does not directly lead to the withdrawal of troops.

Neither the House nor the Senate plans to take up the president’s

overall war spending request this year.

On Oct. 22, Bush sent Congress an update to his earlier war spending proposal that requested an additional \$45.9 billion, bringing to \$196.4 billion the total request for fiscal 2008. Most of the funds, \$189.3 billion, would go to the Pentagon, with an additional \$7.1 billion slated for other agencies, primarily the State Department and other diplomatic programs.

If funding specifically for the war is not provided this year, the Pentagon will have to borrow against its base budget to fund war operations. The military could do this without additional war funding until February or March.

"We'll have to have a bridge fund at some point, I'd prefer it is in [the Defense bill]," Murtha said. "You know, there are other ways. You could put it in the [continuing resolution], you could pass it separately. But obviously, we'd, I'd, prefer to have it in this bill." Congress will need to pass another CR this year because the fiscal 2008 appropriations work will not be done by Nov. 16.