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House of Representatives

The House met at 10:30 a.m.

MORNING HOUR DEBATES

The SPEAKER. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 21, 1997, the Chair will now recognize Members from lists submitted by the majority and minority leaders for morning hour debates. The Chair will alternate recognition between the parties, with each party limited to 30 minutes, and each Member except the majority leader, the minority leader, or the minority whip limited to 5 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Colorado [Mr. HEFLEY] for 5 minutes.

LINE-ITEM VETOES OF DEFENSE LEGISLATION

Mr. HEFLEY. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to discuss the recent decision of the President to exercise the line-item veto on 38 military construction projects which were authorized during the legislative process.

Over the last 3 years, the Congress has made significant progress in advancing needed facilities improvements, meeting both housing and other quality-of-life requirements and the operational and readiness requirements of the military services.

The Congress did not invent these requirements. We relied on the extensive evidence collected all year during hearings and on site visits, and it is clear that a lot more needs to be done. Military infrastructure has been neglected for years. Twenty years ago, the record was filled with discussions about World War II wood, poor housing, and unsafe working conditions. The witnesses have changed, but the testimony has not. The conditions still exist.

The Subcommittee on Military Installation and Facilities, which I chair, has worked closely with the Department of Defense and the military services to upgrade housing and to improve facilities conditions generally. It is easy for some to be cynical about military construction projects. It is easy to call needed improvements pork. In fact, one Member of the other body thinks that anything that the President did not request is pork. If all we were going to do is follow the President's request, then why are we here? We could send in our rubber stamp and simply stay home.

More cynical, however, is the administration's lack of commitment in this area, which has been demonstrated by eroding budget requests. The real decline in the President's request over the past 5 years to support military infrastructure has been 20 percent. The fiscal year 1998 budget request for military construction was $1.6 billion, 16 percent, less than prior year spending levels, all the while the services tell us on the record that they have multibillion-dollar facilities problems.

The $287 million in military construction projects canceled by the President met validated military requirements. Congress worked with these military departments to assure that those funds would address real needs and that the project could be executed in fiscal year 1998. But the needs of the services are not what this exercise is all about.

These are the facts: 33 of the 38 projects, 85 percent of them, canceled by the President are in the President's own 5-year defense program. The remainder were priorities of the military services and the commands. Moreover, 26 percent of the canceled projects, 1 in 4, are in the President's fiscal year 2000 program. They are not good projects now, in the administration's judgment, but they would be good projects just 16 months from now so why cancel them?

When the defense bills are within the constraints of the budget agreement and when the projects are in the President's program, I fail to understand the rationale for the administration's actions. The only explanation I can come to is politics, simple, crass, and cynical politics.

While the President plays politics, soldiers at Fort Campbell will continue to do vehicle maintenance in 1940's-era facilities that contain lead-based paint, asbestos, and faulty exhaust systems. The equipment that cannot fit in the undersized bays has to be worked on outside on gravel even during the winter.

We asked the Army to deploy to places like the urban streets of Somalia and Bosnia, but the troops most likely to go, those at Fort Bragg, will not be training in an adequate way because the President canceled the necessary training complex.

At Lackland Air Force Base, an aircraft painting facility was closed in 1994 because of violations of the Clean Air Act. The remaining facilities can only handle one-third of the workload and do not accommodate certain aircraft at all. The needed replacement facility was canceled by the President.

Navy Station Mayport has inadequate berthing space. The Navy believes this is a critical project. The President canceled it.

I have seen a number of the facilities for which the President has canceled improvements. I am appalled at the lack of judgment demonstrated by this administration.

No one would suggest that the Nation could not defend itself tomorrow without these projects, but given the record of neglect in basic military infrastructure, these cancellations will continue to compound a very serious problem. At each installation these projects affect readiness and, to the extent conditions are inadequate and unsafe, they must in the end be a factor in retention. We cannot continue to ignore this problem, but the administration appears to care very little about it.

The Committee on National Security held a hearing on this issue last week.

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