

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

AIDS Program Bill Clears the House

On May 1, the House passed a bill to implement President Bush's \$15 billion global AIDS program, by a vote of 375-41. As described by International Relations Committee Chairman Henry Hyde (R-Ill.)—who, along with Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), was the bill's chief sponsor—the bill “creates a more responsive, coordinated, and effective approach” among the various government agencies involved in the anti-AIDS effort. The bill funds anti-retroviral therapy, encourages a strategy for palliative care for people with AIDS, and supports efforts to develop vaccines for AIDS and tuberculosis.

Although no one disputed the seriousness of the AIDS crisis, especially in Africa, the bill fails to provide for an emergency science-driver approach, along with proven public health measures, for dealing with the pandemic. It ignores the role of poverty and economic breakdown in the spread of the disease. Instead, a major focus of the bill is, as Hyde put it, “prevention programs that stress sexual abstinence and monogamy as a first line of defense against the spread of this disease.” This includes the so-called ABC program—Abstinence, Being faithful to one partner, and Condom use.

The sharpest debate on the bill came on an amendment by Joe Pitts (R-Pa.) to earmark one-third of the funds in the bill for prevention, to abstinence programs. Pitts claimed that the ABC model has worked successfully in Uganda and that it makes sense “to guarantee that this money will fund what works.” Lantos responded that the Pitts amendment “undermines the ABC approach by earmarking funds solely for the abstinence program.” Lantos questioned whether the amendment would actually prohibit educators from providing full information about the use of condoms to high-risk

populations. Pitts' amendment passed by a vote of 220-197.

Leahy, Powell Come Out Swinging vs. Gingrich

The after-effects of former House Speaker Newt Gingrich's April 22 diatribe against the State Department were still being felt when the Senate Foreign Operations Subcommittee convened on April 30 to take testimony from Secretary of State Colin Powell. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) blasted Gingrich's formulation that the Iraq war involved six months of diplomatic failure and one month of military success. “That's a misstatement of history,” Leahy said. “Diplomacy,” he added, “achieved important results, including a unanimous vote in the UN Security Council.”

Leahy said, “The senior Pentagon officials engaged in name calling, such as ‘Old Europe,’ exacerbated tensions with key allies, making the State Department's job more difficult.” He warned that the war in Iraq “has raised serious questions about the appropriate roles of the Pentagon and the State Department in diplomacy and managing foreign aid programs. . . . It's disturbing that key officials in the Administration seem determined to weaken the State Department.”

Powell thanked Leahy for his comments, then launched into his own defense of his department. He noted that, from time to time in history, the State Department has been criticized for “being like diplomats.” He said, “We do it damn well and I am not going to apologize to anybody.” He said that the department will respond to legitimate criticism, “But if you come after us just to come after us, you're in for a fight, and I'm going to fight back. I am going to protect my department and my people, and I'm also going to defend the policies of the President,

which were attacked even more vigorously than any sideways attack on the contributions and the loyalty and the dedication and the courage and the willingness to serve” of the people who work in the State Department.

Hollings, Byrd Blast Homeland Security Budget

Congressional Democrats are not pleased with the Bush Administration's budget requests for homeland security. This was shown, once again, during a hearing of the Senate Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee on April 30, where Robert Byrd (D-W.V.) took the Administration to task for not matching its funding requests to its rhetoric. He complained that the Bush Administration has “consistently opposed efforts by the Congress to provide critical resources for homeland security,” including funding for first responders, border and port security, and security for nuclear power plants, airports, and other critical infrastructure.

Ernest Hollings (D-S.C.) focussed on security. He said that the Senate had unanimously passed a port security bill last year, that then got bottled up in the House over whether the port security fee included in the bill was a tax—revenue-generating bills must originate in the House. He said that the Senate had offered the House to let it rewrite the bill and send it back, but “we couldn't get them to budge.” Referring to the Administration's budget request, he said, “I find zero under your budget for port security.”

Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge told the subcommittee that the \$36.2 billion request for his department “supports the President's national strategy for homeland security.” He warned that “we are only at the beginning of our long struggle to protect our nation from terrorism.”