

LARSON: GOP WEAKENS DEFENSE BILL ADVANCING IDEOLOGICAL AGENDA OVER RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE COMMON DEF

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WASHINGTON, D.C.- U.S. Congressman John B. Larson (CT-01) stated today that the House Republican leadership seriously weakened an otherwise strong Department of Defense Authorization Bill for Fiscal Year 2004 by adding a series of flawed and highly controversial changes to the Pentagon's civil service system and environmental protection laws.

"I fully support many of the provisions in what is normally a unifying, bipartisan piece of legislation, including the solid support for defense programs critical to Connecticut, increased basic pay to members of the armed forces, quality of life and military housing improvements and improvements to the readiness, infrastructure and modernization of our military.

"Unfortunately, the Republican leadership in the House has chosen to make this a partisan issue by burdening the bill with several outrageous riders that would give Secretary Rumsfeld the unlimited ability to restructure the civilian personnel system and eliminate collective bargaining, due process, and appeal rights for more than 700,000 civil service employees in the Pentagon. These provisions are little more than a power grab by Secretary Rumsfeld, which were thrown into the bill only days before the mark-up, circumventing the process, without the benefit of thorough consideration by the committee. These employees, who are part of a system that has employed hundreds of thousands of dedicated civil servants who have served through nine wars and 11 presidents, are entitled to these civil rights.

"The bill also would exempt the Department of Defense from having to comply with the Endangered Species and the Marine Mammal Protection Acts, even though these laws allow for exemptions for the department on a case-by-case basis and the Pentagon has never requested a waiver of this kind.

"The Republican majority on the House Rules Committee refused to allow any Democratic amendments to address these provisions. I am particularly concerned that the Spratt amendment was not allowed, which was designed to strike provisions that weaken the "Nunn-Lugar" program, which was designed at the end of the cold war to reduce the world's supply of nuclear materials.

"These actions represent a blatant overreach by the Administration not aimed at meeting the needs of our armed forces, but at using this defense bill as a vehicle to advance a separate agenda under the guise of national security. I am deeply disappointed that these unacceptable provisions were included in a piece of critical 'must-pass' legislation for the Congress and our armed forces. It is my hope that by working in conference with our colleagues in the Senate, who wisely chose not to include these controversial riders in their version of this legislation, we can end up with a clean Defense Authorization bill," said Larson.

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Congressman Larson is a Member of the House Armed Services Committee