

Leahy, Bond, Davis And Taylor Launch Follow-On National Guard Empowerment Effort

New bill would sharpen the Pentagon's focus on helping the guard

respond to domestic emergencies

WASHINGTON -- A bipartisan and bicameral team of Congressional leaders on National Guard issues Thursday launched a new phase of their efforts to empower the Guard for its modern-day missions. By clearing away bureaucratic cobwebs in the Defense Department's organizational structure, they hope to improve decision making on homeland defense issues that involve the Guard.

U.S. Sens. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) and Kit Bond (R-Mo.) and U.S.

Reps. Tom Davis (R-Va.) and Gene Taylor (D-Miss.) yesterday introduced identical legislation (S. 2760 and H.R. 5603) that would obligate the Department of Defense to pay greater attention to the mission of homeland defense and to further empower the National Guard to carry out its missions in support of civil authorities at home. Leahy, Bond, Davis and Taylor secured several improvements in the Guard's organization structure in the recently enacted Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008, and their new effort picks up where their earlier Guard Empowerment Bill left off.

In addition to serving as the primary reserve to the active military when assigned abroad, the National Guard is the nation's first military responder for domestic emergencies, such as natural disasters. Leahy, Bond, Davis and Taylor point out that no organization or group in the Department of Defense has more experience, expertise, and capability than the Guard does when it comes to domestic response and support to civilian authorities. Their new bill would enhance the Guard's ability to deal with these situations, ensure that states remain in control of the Guard and other military forces that might be operating domestically during these situations, and thereby improve the Department of Defense's domestic capabilities.

Their new bill would increase the quality of advice at the highest levels on homeland defense matters by placing the Chief of the National Guard -- now a four-star general officer position -- on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The legislation would also make sure that the nation's governors maintain so-called tactical control over federal military forces during emergencies, and it would give the National Guard Bureau budgetary authority to research, validate and procure essential equipment for the Guard. The legislation also would ensure that United States Northern Command, along with United States Pacific Command, remain in support of a state/national Guard-led response.

"Before and after 9/11 and Katrina, the National Guard has skillfully performed its domestic security roles, which continue to grow in importance," said Leahy, co-chair with Bond of the 91-member U.S. Senate National Guard Caucus. "The Pentagon's decision making structure has not kept pace with the homeland security challenges we face. The National Guard has the know-how, the experience and the skill sets to operate at home, wherever we need them. The Guard needs to know that the active military - which also has much to contribute in this realm -- will play a truly supportive role. The Guard also needs new authorities, like clearly stated budgetary powers, so that the Pentagon will make sure that critically needed equipment for domestic emergencies is available."

"These reforms, along with previous enacted reforms last year, will help put the National Guard on an equal footing with decision makers inside the Pentagon," said Bond. "Now more than ever the need for Congress to empower the Guard to defend the nation and secure the homeland from natural disasters or a terrorist attack is clear."

"We need to increase the Guard's role in decision-making, establish a budget for Guard equipment, set up an integrated planning process for domestic response and strengthen the powers of governors to control the military within their states," said Davis. "This legislation represents the correct Constitutional balance of state and federal military responsibility for the defense and security of the homeland. It empowers, integrates and equips the men and women of the National Guard."

"I saw firsthand the need for a strengthened National Guard in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina," said Taylor. "The Guard's presence is crucial after a natural disaster, and we must ensure that they are best equipped to respond to them. Allowing states to remain in control of the National Guard after a disaster will enable the Guard to quickly react to the specific needs of the affected state. We must improve the way the Department of Defense handles domestic emergencies, and this legislation is a major step toward accomplishing that."

The Guard empowerment bill has been endorsed by The National Guard Association of the United States, the Adjutants General Association of the United States and the Enlisted National Guard Association of the United States.

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