

February 27, 2003

White House Concedes That Counterterror Budget Is Meager

By PHILIP SHENON

WASHINGTON, Feb. 26 — Responding to criticism from Democrats and to the mounting concern of state and local governments, the White House is now saying that the long delayed government spending plan for the year does not provide enough money to protect against terrorist attacks on American soil.

After initially praising the giant spending package that was shaped by Congressional Republicans, the White House has reversed itself in recent days, conceding in a series of public statements that a closer reading of the 3,000-page spending bill shows that domestic counterterrorism programs were shortchanged. President Bush signed the bill into law earlier this month.

The latest acknowledgment came this week from the president himself.

In a speech here to the National Governors Association, where governors expressed deep concern about their ability to pay for the equipment and training needed to prepare for a terrorist attack, Mr. Bush said he was "disappointed" with the Republican-authored spending package because it had failed to provide adequate money for local counterterrorism programs. And he said that Congress was to blame.

In remarks that struck some in the audience as unusually sharp given that both houses of Congress are controlled by the president's party, Mr. Bush said that Congress "did not respond to the \$3.5 billion we asked for — they not only reduced the budget that we asked for, they earmarked a lot of the money."

He was referring to the \$3.5 billion that the White House requested more than a year ago for state and local governments to pay for counterterrorism equipment and training, a centerpiece of the administration's domestic security program.

"That's a disappointment," he said, "a disappointment when the executive branch gets micro-managed by the legislative branch."

White House officials say they believe the \$397.4 billion spending bill, which will finance the government through September, contains only about \$1.3 billion in counterterrorism money for local governments.

Congressional leaders have insisted that they provided the full \$3.5 billion sought by President Bush for so-called first responders, like local fire and police departments.

But White House officials say most of that money went to emergency-response programs that had little to do with counterterrorism, a view shared by some private budget specialists who have reviewed the bill.

"We wanted specific counterterrorism funding," said a White House official. "We weren't talking about community policing programs. We weren't talking about grants to buy bulletproof vests for police officers."

The president's remarks, which came two weeks after the White House raised the color-coded national terrorist alert to "orange," signifying a "high risk" of terrorist attack, have infuriated Republicans in Congress, who say they closely consulted with the White House in preparing the spending deal.

Mr. Bush's criticism of Congressional leaders followed similar statements made over the last two weeks by Homeland Secretary Tom Ridge and by Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesmen.

Aides to Republican leaders said they would not publicly respond to Mr. Bush for now. But the aides accused the White House of bowing to pressure from Congressional Democrats, including likely presidential candidates, who have charged that Mr. Bush is putting the nation at risk by spending too little on domestic security.

State and local leaders from both political parties have joined in the criticism of Washington, saying that they are desperate for the promised federal help.

"We have a lot of police agencies in the state that were assured by the administration, repeatedly, that this money was on the way," said Gov. Gary Locke of Washington, a Democrat.

He said that many police and fire departments had bought hazardous-materials protective suits and other counterterrorism equipment in the expectation that they would be reimbursed by the federal government.

"And now," Governor Locke said, "they're going to have to scramble to terminate other programs in order to cover those costs."

Governor Bob Taft of Ohio, a Republican, singled out Congressional leaders for blame, saying he agreed with the president that lawmakers "did not appropriate the amount that was recommended and then earmarked part of what they appropriated."

Spokesmen for two major Republican authors of the spending bill — Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, and C. W. Bill Young of Florida, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee — said they had no comment on Mr. Bush's criticism.

In a sign of the importance and political sensitivity of the issue of domestic-defense spending, both of the appropriations panels have announced plans to establish subcommittees that will deal specifically with the operations of the Homeland Security Department and related agencies.

A Republican Congressional aide, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that Republicans were angry over the efforts of the White House to distance itself from the domestic-security provisions of the spending bill.

"We told the White House months in advance what we were going to do with this bill — and we believe it provides an historically unprecedented amount of money for state and local assistance," the aide said.

Mr. Bush's remarks will strengthen the hand of Congressional Democrats who have announced their intention to seek billions of dollars in new counterterrorism financing in a supplemental budget request

next month.

"The White House is realizing how vulnerable it is on this issue," said Senator Charles E. Schumer of New York, who has been appointed by his Democratic colleagues as a spokesman on domestic security. "This is the first time that their attitude about homeland security — their don't worry, be happy attitude — has been shed."

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