GUEST OBSERVER

By Daniel J. Kaniewski

War Requires Homeland Panels' Attention, Too

As the United States marches to war in the Middle East, we can expect the members and staff of the Armed Services Committees to be working long hours in the coming weeks as they closely follow the military's actions. However, given the real threat of terrorist attacks and the heightened level of alert at home, the war overseas should not be the only focus of Congressional scrutiny. The protection of the nation's homeland must be an equal priority for Congress.

Until recently, Congress took a schizophrenic approach to homeland security oversight and funding. Dozens of committees and subcommittees in each chamber operated independently in the realm each saw as its own. Last year I visited committees and asked them what they believed their homeland security jurisdiction to be. The responses I received were anticipated; many committees said that they were the lead on biological terrorism, for instance. One committee in particular that I had never thought of having much to do with homeland security gave the surprising answer to the jurisdiction question: "everything."

Much has changed since last year. We have a new Department of Homeland Security in the executive branch, led by a capable secretary, Tom Ridge. And after the department's creation, Congress realized that it too needed to consolidate its homeland security efforts. Today, both chambers are organized to oversee and fund the new department.

The House took a particularly commendable step to organize itself. Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) realized that it was important to harness all of the expertise that Congress had amassed in the homeland security area and wisely chose the select committee model for the House oversight committee. By acknowledging the roles of various committees in homeland security oversight (and guaranteeing the committees membership on the new committee), Hastert enabled the select committee to meticulously unwind the spools of jurisdictional thread that had been on high-speed wind since Sept. 11, 2001.

An added benefit is that a cross-pollination of members will result in committees with a more systemic view. For example, several members of the House Armed Services Committee were given slots on the Select Committee on Homeland Security because, for one, the committees had gained much expertise in the area of weapons of mass destruction. Now, if these members hear in the Armed Services Committee room that the military intends to take a course of action that may in itself be relatively noncontroversial (i.e., more destructive weapons to penetrate Saddam Hussein's bunkers), they can put on their homeland security hat and see that there are potential unintended consequences to the homeland (i.e., intelligence officials suggested in a homeland security hearing that attacks on America are more likely if high-yield weapons are employed in the war). Thus, it is critical that all committees overseeing the war understand that there is a parallel effort focused on the homeland operating in a committee room just down the hall.

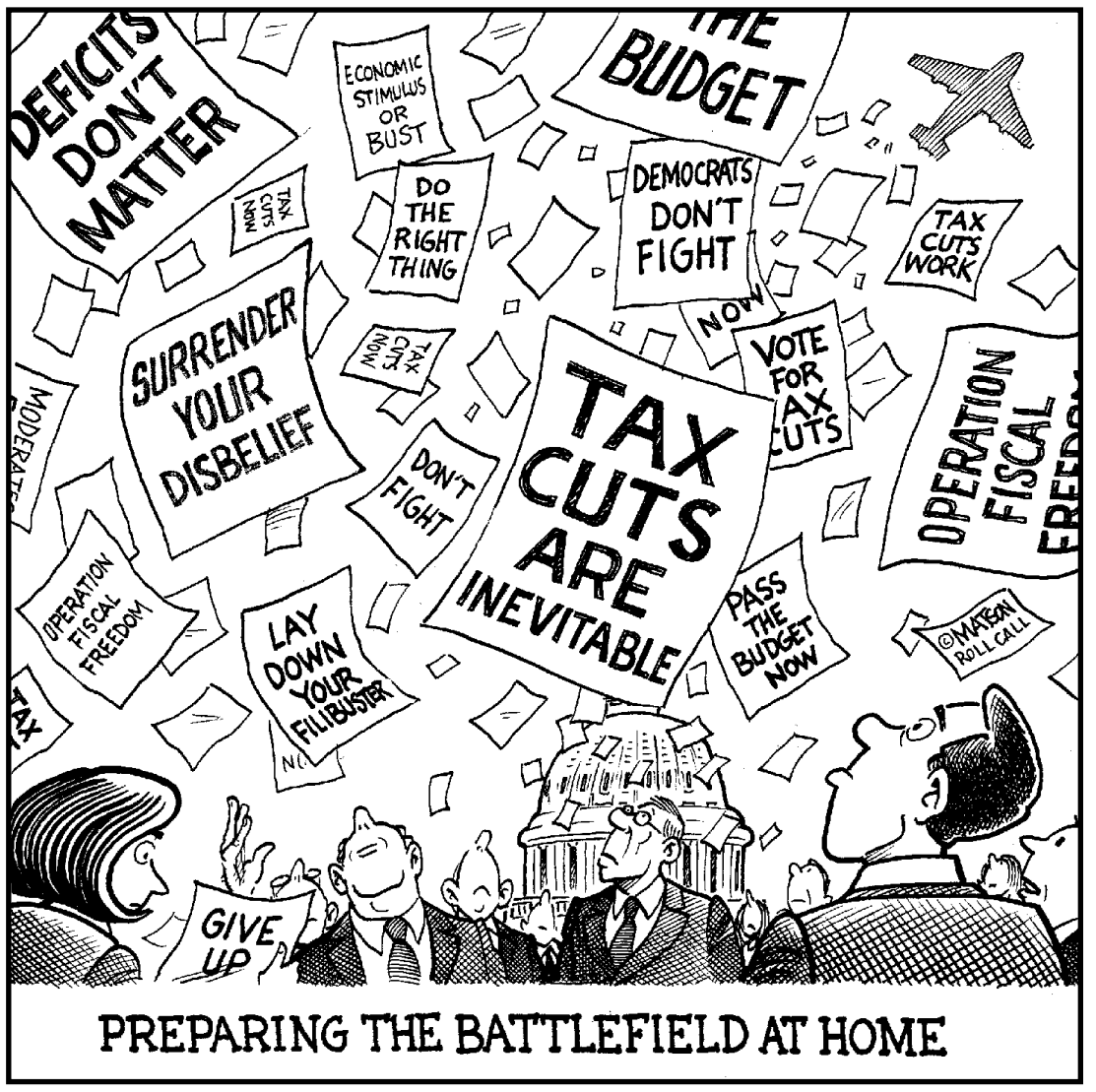
In addition to the members of the select committee representing stakeholder committees, members with relevant professional experience were drafted for the effort. In fact several members have expertise that parallels that found in the Department of Homeland Security. For example, two first responders — Rep. Curt Weldon (R-Pa.), a former fire chief, and freshman Member Kendrick Meek (D-Fla.), formerly a Florida state trooper — stand ready to apply their practical experience in a similar fashion that a Department of Homeland Security employee would. In times of crisis such in-house expertise will be essential for the committee to understand the gravity of the situation and communicate intelligently with other committees and the public.

The dual-track oversight of homeland protection and overseas conflict will be necessary to maintain the delicate balance of public support. For example, should the new Department of Homeland Security program, Operation Liberty Shield, excessively impinge on civil liberties, or the inverse, not prevent terrorists' entry, citizens may either decry America as a police state or suffer the consequences of an attack that their government failed to stop. The result of either scenario is reduced public support for an overseas conflict that Americans view as the proximate cause of heightened alert at home. The onus is on the committees overseeing the new department to maintain the delicate balance of civil liberties and protection at home, while at the same time realizing that other committees overseeing the war can impact their efforts.

Overseeing our defenders of freedom overseas is a familiar role for a Congressional committee; a single committee providing oversight of our domestic preparedness efforts is not. Just as the Armed Services Committees can count on a busy time ahead dutifully overseeing the military's expenditures of funds, asking the tough questions, understanding the strategy of the military leaders and providing advice along the way, so too should the Homeland Security committees be vigilant in their oversight.

When I am on the Hill late at night in the coming weeks I hope to see the Homeland Security committees burning some midnight oil. Only then will I rest easy at night.

Daniel J. Kaniewski, formerly a homeland security fellow in the House, is the executive director of the Center for Emergency Preparedness at George Washington University Medical Center.



PREPARING THE BATTLEFIELD AT HOME

File Photo

Kaniewski hopes that Rep. Christopher Cox and others on the Homeland Security Committee burn the midnight oil.

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