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Plane Politics

Cost 6/19/95

Schizophrenia is the reigning political ideology here.

As President Bill Clinton was meeting Republican demands to cut domestic spending for the sake of a balanced budget, Congressional Republicans (aided by a few Democrats) were voting to build 20 more B-2 bombers.

Eventual cost: \$38 billion. Target: Unknown. Not for nothing is the B-2 called the Stealth bomber; it continually slips under the radar of rational discourse.

Rep. John Kasich (R-Ohio), chairman of the House Budget Committee, appealed to his colleagues for common sense.

"The B-2 was to be used to fly around the Soviet Union in the middle of a nuclear war looking for things to bomb," he said. "I could not conceive of flying the plane around in the middle of a nuclear war."

Further, Kasich pointed out, the Pentagon does not want any more B-2s. "The Secretary of Defense (Bill Perry) came to see me and said, 'Do not put these white elephants in my budget, because if you do, you keep me from buying the things I need. . . . Do not force me to spend money on a program I do not want.'"

If the B-2 is thrust upon the Air Force, Kasich said, the Pentagon will have to cut back on more critical needs, like the C-17 transport and overall military readiness, the crucial ability to respond in a crisis.

Additional spending for unneeded B-2s makes balancing the rest of the budget that much harder. "We are in a zero-sum situation," argued Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass). "Build more nuclear submarines, and you must cut Medicare. Build more B-2 bombers, and it comes out of college student aid."

For months, both Republicans and Democrats have talked about making tough choices on the budget. But the B-2 wasn't even a tough choice. It is so costly that even hawks like Sen. John Glenn (D-Ohio) blanch. Its original mission has vanished, and its advocates are concocting ever-weirder military scenarios as to why it might be needed. The chief script: The B-2 would enable America to become the world's policeman, armed with a high-tech, no-risk billy club to deter aggressors everywhere.

Conservatives who might be reluc-

tant to vote against a weapons system had the cover of the entire military establishment: The chairman and vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, commanders in the field and an independent commission, all saying no more B-2s are needed beyond the currently budgeted 20.

Plus, the Republicans had the cover of Kasich, their own budget chairman, telling them the country cannot afford this airplane.

Instead, politics prevailed. Northrop-Grumman, the B-2's builder, has carefully spread contracts all across the country. The B-2 means jobs: \$38 billion worth of jobs for the most skilled American workers. Rep. Pat Schroeder (D-Colo.) said, "We are just doing this to keep some defense contractors who put out big political contributions, I think, alive."

To Rep. Neil Abercrombie (D-Hawaii) the vote was a fatal indicator of long-term defeat in the attempt to hold down federal spending. He accused Republicans of backing Kasich on the principle of budget cuts—and then stiffing their own chairman when it actually came time to vote for a cut.

"You are sticking a knife in the fiscal budget proposal that Mr. Kasich put forward and that everybody, Democrats and Republicans, have applauded," Abercrombie told the House. "This is a test of integrity in budgeting. This is a glide path not to a balanced budget, but to balanced-budget oblivion."

The House vote on the B-2 sends every participant—from members of Congress to campaign contributors—a message: Politics as usual works as well as it ever did.

If the B-2 can survive both a budget crunch and bipartisan common sense, why should members of Congress make tough choices on, say, ending the federal electric-power subsidies that let Las Vegas casinos light their signs for half the kilowatt-hour cost it

takes to heat a house in the Northeast? Why should anyone take heat from the nursing-home lobby by voting to cut Medicaid spending?

There are far tougher votes than the B-2 coming down the road if the Republicans are serious about balancing the budget in seven years—and if Clinton is serious about balancing it in 10: Votes on farm subsidies, highway projects, advanced scientific research, job training, physician reimbursement rates.

And now the word is out to all the special interests:

This Congress can be rolled. The biggest target the B-2 is ever likely to hit is your wallet.