

March 26, 2009 - Murtha: Keep the Helicopter

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By Roxana Tiron

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The chairman of the House Appropriations Defense panel has personally urged the White House not to scrap a new presidential helicopter program that has doubled in cost, even though President Obama has said he's comfortable riding in the old model.

Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), who has proposed a more scaled-back version, said that he spoke with some of Obama's closest advisers about the need to buy a new Marine One helicopter to replace the current chopper, which is now several decades old.

Murtha told reporters on Wednesday that he visited the White House last month and spoke about the issue with National Security Adviser Jim Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen and Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

Murtha said that canceling the new presidential helicopter, also called the VH-71, "would be a real mistake." If the White House scrapped the helicopter, "it would be foolish," Murtha said.

The new VH-71 program, originally thought to cost \$6.1 billion, is now projected to run as much as \$13 billion. Two versions were initially planned — a simpler, streamlined version to be delivered first and a more advanced version to come later.

Five streamlined helicopters will be delivered by September 2010. The 23 choppers in the second group were the desired version, sources said, while the helicopters in the first increment were meant to fill an immediate need for more modern aircraft. The second version was supposed to be the one to satisfy the requirements of the Marine Helicopter Squadron One, HMX-1, which flies the choppers.

Much of the technology in the helicopter is geared toward keeping the president secure and allowing him to perform his duties uninterrupted by being up in the air. Lawmakers and the companies have complained that the evolving requirements have led to the escalating costs.

The presidential helicopter is generally used to ferry the president on shorter trips — often from the White House to Andrews Air Force Base or Camp David. Andrews is an 11.7-mile trip and Camp David about 70 miles away.

Murtha was an early supporter of the idea to build only the first version of the helicopter. In recent weeks, he has intensified his call, saying that would bring the program more in line with the initial budget. He is joined by a growing chorus of House lawmakers and supporters of the program under contract to Lockheed Martin and partner AgustaWestland, a British-Italian venture. The Navy manages the program.

By extending the first version of the VH-71 to replace the entire current fleet of Marine One helicopters, supporters argue, a budget estimate of about \$6.8 billion can be maintained.

President Obama unleashed a maelstrom last month during a fiscal responsibility forum when he brought up the helicopter program as an example of “the procurement process gone amok.” He said that the current helicopter, which is almost three decades old, seems “perfectly adequate to him.”

The helicopter is only called Marine One when the president is on board. The chopper is often used to ferry VIPs.

Questions over how to keep the costs for the VH-71 in line come as Connecticut’s congressional delegation is attempting to give Stratford, Conn.-based Sikorsky a shot at winning the presidential helicopter contract. Sikorsky lost out to Lockheed and AgustaWestland in 2005. Since then, the company and the congressional delegation have been trying to find openings to give Sikorsky another chance.

A top defense authorizer, Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.), has maintained that Sikorsky should have won the original competition for the new helicopter.

Sikorsky competed with its S-92 helicopter. It is the same helicopter that the company is under contract for with the Canadian military. But that \$5 billion program has also run into delays and cost increases. Canadian forces are slated to receive their S-92 helicopters in 2012 rather than 2008, as Sikorsky initially projected, according to reports in the Canadian press.

The Federal Aviation Authority this week grounded the entire S-92 fleet to allow operators to replace parts that may have contributed to a March 12 crash off the shore of Newfoundland that killed 17 people. A Sikorsky spokesman said the delays in Canada are mostly due to strict U.S. export rules, and the company would not have the same issues on a domestic contract.

The quandary over the fate of the presidential helicopter will likely be resolved when the Pentagon submits its budget request to Capitol Hill in a few weeks.

The budget details will likely also shed light on the fate of the Air Force's new midair refueling tanker program. But Murtha is ready to make his own suggestions. The veteran appropriator said he will lobby Gates on his idea to split the \$35 billion tanker contract between Northrop Grumman and Boeing. Gates opposes that idea and has called such a plan "bad public policy."

Murtha appears undeterred. He said he will have his plan for a competitive dual-buy finalized by this Friday and will present it to Gates soon. Murtha acknowledged that going with two different tankers will be more expensive upfront, but claimed that over the 40-year life span of the program it will be cost-effective.

The Air Force would have to spend money on two ways to maintain the aircraft, different types of spare parts and increased logistics — all factors that could boost the bill for the tankers.

Murtha also acknowledged that he has yet to convince one key lawmaker on his panel about his plan: Rep. Norm Dicks (D-Wash.), a strong Boeing supporter who opposes splitting the contract between Boeing and Northrop.

A team of Northrop Grumman and EADS North America, the parent company of Airbus, initially won the \$35 billion contract to build the new tankers, but Boeing successfully protested that award with the Government Accountability Office. The Pentagon has yet to decide how to move forward with a new competition and how to handle one of the most politically tenuous contracts.