

Energy Department Finds

Ally on GOP Side

*Reform-Minded Tennessee Congressman 'Fighting Like a Warrior'**for His District's Biggest Employer*By Kenneth J. Cooper
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OAK RIDGE, Tenn.—Freshman Rep. Zach Wamp (R-Tenn.) campaigned for his east Tennessee seat as a brash reformer with the slogan "Wamp Congress" and then committed himself to limiting government by almost always voting with the new GOP majority on its "Contract With America."

On a more recent vote, Wamp joined all House Republicans but one in supporting a budget-balancing plan that would abolish four Cabinet agencies, including the Energy Department.

Why, then, did Wamp invite Energy Secretary Hazel R. O'Leary into his district last week?

The answer lies just beyond those tree-covered hills facing the local hotel where O'Leary received two standing ovations for her Friday luncheon talk: the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and two other Energy Department facilities that together are not only the dominant employer in Wamp's district, but the biggest in the state.

"Through the appropriations process, I'm fighting like a warrior to maintain the Energy Department," Wamp said.

This rare dissent by a GOP loyalist illustrates how much it harder it may be for congressional Republicans to go beyond planning to balance the budget and actually making the first round of spending cuts in the 1996 appropriations bills. Many Republicans are likely to confront conflicts between the party's goal of a balanced budget and a lawmaker's interests in protecting his or her district and political future. Already, groups of House Republicans have quietly protested proposed cuts in agriculture and transportation programs.

"With Republicans focused on supporting a party ethic . . . at some point in time, you have to step back and ask yourself, 'Is the ethic correct?'" O'Leary, defending her department, told reporters.

In Wamp's case, the energetic freshman so far has resolved conflicts over nonbinding details of the House budget in favor of the economic interests of his Chattanooga-based district, which Marilyn Lloyd, a Democrat, represented for 20 years until she retired in 1994.

Wamp is working hard to preserve four federal agencies—all Democratic creations—that his Republican colleagues would abolish or sell to private interests. Besides the Energy

Department created under President Jimmy Carter, the other agencies dear to Wamp's district are the Depression-era Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and the Economic Development Administration (EDA) and Appalachian Regional Commission, both products of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

Wamp's district has the most TVA employees, about 6,000, in the country. He considers the agency important enough to put his affiliation with the bipartisan TVA Caucus on his congressional letterhead.

Of the other two agencies, Wamp said: "I have found since I was elected that the EDA and the Appalachian Regional Commission have actually been very critical tools for economic growth in east Tennessee. There is a role for the federal government. It should be more limited, and we must go through this transition" to higher private investment.

But the Energy Department is by far his biggest budget worry. "I don't want it abolished. I want it reformed," he said, despite his vote on the budget resolution calling for its abolition. He said he voted for the resolution because a balanced budget is a priority.

The three Energy Department facilities in Oak Ridge directly employ 9,000 people in his district and 19,000 statewide. Mostly through the private contractor that operates the facilities, Lockheed Martin Energy Systems Inc., the department pumps \$2 billion a year into the state economy.

Many technical and service businesses have located near Oak Ridge since the town of 30,000 was established during World War II to house scientists secretly doing what was then called "atomic" research for the Manhattan Project. Those small companies have grown dependent on federally funded contracts from the sprawling complex.

"If they pulled all the [federal] money out of that, it would be bad. This town would suffer dramatically," predicted Mark Mestayer, who does marketing for a temporary personnel agency that does 40 percent of its business with the Oak Ridge complex.

O'Leary spoke on the final day of a two-day summit of government and business leaders that Wamp convened to show off the scientific prowess of the Oak Ridge facilities, build public support for them and plot strategy for weaning the area's economy off federal funds. From Gov. Don Sundquist on down, every prominent Tennessee Republican except presidential candidate Lamar

Alexander showed up. Appearances by O'Leary, Lloyd and Rep. Bob Clement (D) made it a bipartisan affair.

"I don't believe that this fight needs to be partisan," O'Leary told summit participants. She praised Wamp for "vision and understanding" and saluted "wonderful warriors from Tennessee" like freshman Republican

Sens. Fred D. Thompson and Bill Frist for defending her department.

The Senate so far has not gone along with a House GOP proposal to transfer to the Pentagon nuclear weapons production done by the Energy Department and sharply curtail its research activities. Senate Budget Chairman Pete V. Domenici (R) is from New Mexico, home to two national laboratories.

O'Leary emphasized the national security and economic value of department facilities in Oak Ridge.

A former nuclear weapons plant now functions as "the country's Fort Knox for enriched uranium," in the words of one official, and temporarily stores nuclear material removed from a classified number of warheads in the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan. Another facility that once processed uranium today performs environmental research and cleans up its old waste. The national laboratory, one of nine across the country, conducts a broad range of scientific research and also helps U.S. businesses upgrade their manufacturing technology.

Tour guides showed visitors to the technology center maps indicating the number of businesses helped in nearly every state and in each of Tennessee's nine congressional districts.

"We're understanding better and

better how to communicate," Dave Beck, the center's director, explained with a scientist's understatement.

But national labs like Oak Ridge represent a prime target for House Budget Chairman John R. Kasich (R-Ohio) and other deficit hawks.

Wamp cited former president Ronald Reagan to justify his support for the Energy Department. Reagan did propose abolishing the department, a move that the General Accounting Office said would save little, but he also supported doubling the National Science Foundation's budget. "He believes in a long-term investment in science" as a way to promote economic growth, Wamp said of the "godfather of the modern conservative movement."

Wamp vowed he was willing to "stand up and sacrifice my political blood" to save the Energy Department and Tennessee Valley Authority. To achieve those goals, he has been lobbying fellow freshmen on the House Appropriations Committee for months.

"Mr. Wamp is an important ally because he knows what's important to the department and his region," said Martha A. Krebs, assistant secretary for energy research. "But the proof is in the votes. I think he has to work on the freshmen and the second-termers because that's the base of the new [Republican] majority."