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TEXT:

politics

The Corps Cored

The Bushies take a big bite out of the Army Corps of Engineers budget.

By Michael Grunwald

Posted Monday, May 5, 2003, at 3:08 PM PT

The Bush administration is maniacally intolerant of dissent. It doesn't give a damn what Congress thinks about anything. The good news is: That combination of enforced loyalty and executive arrogance is reining in the environmentally disastrous, economically ludicrous pork-barrel projects of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. This fledgling corps reform campaign hasn't gotten much attention because "corps reform" sounds like something Michael Dukakis might read about on the beach, and environmentalists are too busy portraying President Bush as the second coming of the Exxon Valdez to give credit where it's due but corps reform could end up doing more to benefit the American environment than a dozen Arctic refuges. Take the Oregon Inlet jetties project, a \$108 million boondoggle that for years was the pet project of Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C. The corps wanted to build two of the world's largest jetties near the tourist beaches of North Carolina's Outer Banks, ostensibly to protect local fishermen who had complained about treacherous seas. But scientists had warned that the jetties could create a serious erosion problem, ravaging the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge and Cape Hatteras National Seashore. And the General Accounting Office had concluded that the corps study justifying the jetties was wildly flawed; the project's cost to taxpayers worked out to more than \$500,000 per affected boat.

For those of us who follow the surreal multibillion-dollar world of water projects, there is only one surprising thing about that paragraph: It is written in the past tense. That's because the Oregon Inlet project died Thursday at the age of 33. It was killed by the White House, in one of the boldest presidential efforts to stop a water project since President Carter enraged Congress with a "hit list" targeting 19 of them in 1977. Every modern presidential administration has wanted to stop stinkers like Oregon Inlet, but every previous administration has been stymied by disobedient corps officials who see boondoggles as their livelihood and powerful congressional porkers who use the corps to steer jobs and money to their constituents. But the Bush team doesn't allow disloyalty, and it doesn't kowtow to Congress. Instead, it has cut the corps budget, frozen all new construction, and ordered the corps to focus on projects with real benefits and less outrageous environmental costs. The result should save money and wetlands.

The Army Corps is one of the most bizarre bureaucracies in the federal government and one of the most effective at generating work to keep itself busy. From its roots as a tiny regiment in George Washington's army, it has grown into a public works behemoth with 35,000 employees more than the departments of Labor, Education, and Energy combined. A third of them work on military programs that are usually uncontroversial the recent flap over the contract to Halliburton in Iraq was an exception but the rest focus on civil works that reflect the agency's addictions to concrete and the control of nature. The corps has dredged and deepened America's ports and harbors, armored and manhandled America's rivers, and pumped sand onto America's beaches. It has built thousands of dams, dikes, locks, levees, seawalls, and floodgates, often justified by dubious economic benefits. And in the late 1990s, under leaders who behaved like dot-com executives seeking to increase market share "Seek Growth Opportunities" was actually one of three planks of the agency's "Corps Vision" the corps mission expanded to include construction of schools and sewage plants, cleanup of hazardous and radioactive waste, and massive restoration projects designed to revive ecosystems it damaged in the past. It is now overseeing an \$8 billion effort to resuscitate the Florida Everglades, the largest

environmental project in world history.

Over the years, the corps has become a true rogue agency, operating virtually independently of its supposed bosses in the executive branch, taking marching orders almost exclusively from the congressional porkers who lard its budget with their pet projects. The corps has clashed with every president since Franklin Roosevelt, and it has won almost every battle, thanks to its protection racket on Capitol Hill. In 2000, for example, after corps leaders were caught manipulating an economic study in order to justify a billion-dollar Mississippi River project and devising a secret "Program Growth Initiative" in order to boost their budget by 50 percent, the Clinton administration tried to issue a few mild guidelines reminding them to obey civilian authorities. But a few powerful senators vowed that the guidelines would not stand, so the administration withdrew them a week later. Sen. Christopher Bond, R-Mo., then proposed legislative language designed to prevent any administration from changing anything about the corps at any time.

The Bush administration does not get bullied like that. The early proof came just five months after then-Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., persuaded Bush to name former Mississippi Congressman Mike Parker to oversee the corps. Parker was accustomed to the annual kabuki game accompanying corps budgets: Presidents always propose cutting them, but Congress gleefully restores the cuts. So when he testified before the Senate Budget Committee, he told corps defenders like Kent Conrad, D-N.D., and Bond that the agency needed much more money than the Bush budget was offering. Budget Director Mitch Daniels promptly shot off a memo to the White House, complaining that Parker and the senators "had reached convivial agreement that the president's budget is unacceptable and probably just a cynical ploy." And Bush just as promptly fired Parker, the first administration official to get the ax. Republicans and Democrats on the Hill howled in outrage—\*one proposed a tickertape parade for Parker; another lumped the Daniels budget office in with the "axis of evil"—\*but Bush aides made it clear they could not care less. The administration's only public statement was to wish the critics a happy Valentine's Day. Daniels, a tight-fisted budget hawk who was once spotted picking change out of a toilet in college, has been the administration's most aggressive advocate of corps reform. He rejected the corps justification of its \$140 million Dallas Floodway Extension, a ridiculous flood-control scheme pushed by GOP Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas. He pushed a "no new starts" policy that has forced the corps to focus on its \$23 billion backlog of approved projects. And his budget zeroed out some of the worst corps stinkers, including a \$188 million plan to build the world's largest flood-control pump to drain the lower Mississippi Delta and a \$319 million irrigation bonanza for a few Arkansas rice farmers. "Mitch Daniels," one liberal enviro says, "is why God invented conservative Republicans." Corps leaders have begun to absorb his message, pledging that the era of mission creep is over, vowing to rebuild their shattered credibility. The general in charge of civil works recently issued a stunning memo acknowledging that an "overall decline" in corps planning was having "unacceptable consequences" on the agency's recommendations to Congress.

Now the White House Council on Environmental Quality has scuttled the Oregon Inlet jetties, arguing that the clear costs to taxpayers and barrier beaches do not justify the hazy benefits to fishermen. "We're a cost-benefit administration," says CEQ chairman James Connaughton. If that's true, then many corps projects could be in deep trouble. Even an internal Pentagon investigation in 2000 concluded that corps cost-benefit analyses are systematically skewed to justify large-scale construction projects.

Of course, the corps is still beloved on Capitol Hill, and there could be political consequences if the Bush administration keeps pushing for change. Some historians believe that Carter's hit list ruined his

relationship with Congress—and he only managed to kill one of the 19 projects on the list. It is not yet clear how deeply President Bush is willing to antagonize traditional corps defenders like the Farm Bureau, the barge industry, and Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Ted Stevens of Alaska. He did not veto last year's corps budget, even though Congress predictably rejected his proposed cuts. He passed up a chance to cancel a particularly egregious \$108 million plan to protect flood-prone farmland in Missouri. And the administration has not pushed a Clinton administration proposal to end corps dredging on the almost bargeless Apalachicola River—even though Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida supports it. Still, because Bush is caricatured so often as a despoiler of nature, it only seems fair to point out that his underlings are moving the corps in a greener direction. Are the Bushies motivated by genuine concern for the environment? Or are they just trying to save some money? Who cares?

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