



CONGRESS

The House just passed a defense bill with controversial abortion, LGBTQ measures. It doesn't stand a chance in the Senate.

Top Democrats said provisions on abortion, transgender medical care and diversity programs are an “an ode to bigotry and ignorance.”

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House Republicans united to narrowly pass major defense policy legislation on Friday that restricts the Pentagon policies on abortion access, medical care for

transgender troops and diversity in a narrow vote.

But the many culture war provisions Republicans packed into the must-pass National Defense Authorization Act to win conservative votes are doomed in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

The 219-210 vote on Friday saw all but four Democrats oppose the bill, which authorizes a national defense budget of \$886 billion for fiscal 2024.

Conversely, only four Republicans opposed the measure as Speaker Kevin McCarthy held his conference together to clear the legislation.

“I take solace in the fact that this is not going to become law and we have an opportunity to correct it,” said Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.), the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, of the path forward. “But it’s really very disturbing how divisive all this has become, the degree to which the Republican majority wants to attack diversity. Bottom line. Attack trans people. Attack women. Attack people of color.”

The typically bipartisan bill dissolved into a nearly GOP-only measure Thursday as ugly fights over abortion, transgender medical care and diversity programs that have shown up in other bills in the House took center stage. As the rightward tilt became clear on the House floor, Smith and other Democrats who had previously supported the NDAA in the Armed Services Committee derided the revamped bill as “an ode to bigotry and ignorance.”

McCarthy needed near-unanimous GOP support in his five-seat majority to clear the bill. McCarthy — who as minority leader [lamented Democrats passing a party-line defense bill in 2019](#) as failing “a test of whether they could put their radicalism aside and work across the aisle” — and his team spent the week navigating GOP infighting over whether to hold votes on controversial amendments, which initially stalled the bill, and to minimize defections.

Once both the House and Senate pass their versions of the bill, lawmakers will work out a compromise version of the two. It’s widely expected that most of the controversial provisions will be watered down to make it more palatable for the Democratic-controlled Senate.

“We know that this bill is going nowhere in the Senate because it is disgusting and outrageous,” Minority Whip Katherine Clark (D-Mass.) said Friday on CNN. “So we will have a chance to work with the Senate and bring a national security bill back that we can support.”

Adding conservative policies to the bill ultimately won over members of the House Freedom Caucus and other conservatives who rarely, if ever, vote for the defense bill.

“There is absolutely no reason why any Republican should vote against this bill,” Armed Services Chair Mike Rogers (R-Ala.) said on the House floor Friday.

“It will enhance the congressional oversight of the DOD. It will improve the quality of life for our service members and their families,” he said. “And it will help build the ready, capable and lethal fighting force we need to deter the Chinese Communist Party.”

Rep. Kevin Hern (R-Okla.), the chair of the conservative Republican Study Committee, hailed the bill as “the first Republican-only NDAA since Eisenhower.”

The Senate, meanwhile, is set to begin debate on its own defense legislation

next week. That bill includes some provisions that boost scrutiny of diversity programs, seeks more information from the Pentagon on the legality of its abortion policies and forces the military to dispose of unused border wall materials it still possesses.

But that measure enjoys bipartisan support so far and cleared the Senate Armed Services Committee with just one vote against it.

The clearest signal that Republicans would go their own way came on Thursday when the House narrowly adopted Rep. Ronny Jackson's (R-Texas) amendment to [block Pentagon policies that reimburse travel costs for troops seeking abortions](#).

Democrats telegraphed that the proposal was a red line. The measure was adopted anyway in a 221-213 vote, with only two Republicans breaking ranks.

Republicans didn't stop there. They muscled through proposals to end coverage of transition surgeries and hormone treatments for transgender troops, gut diversity and inclusion programs and limit the specific flags that can be flown at military installations — a move that would effectively ban flying the pride flag.

The Armed Services Committee already took aim at a variety of contentious issues in its June markup of the legislation. The panel approved GOP proposals to pave the way for the return of troops kicked out for refusing the Covid-19 vaccine, barring funding for drag shows on military bases and banning the promotion of critical race theory. The legislation still won the support of all but one committee Democrat.

Still, some of the most hardline efforts were defeated late Thursday evening.

Far-right Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene's (R-Ga.) push to prohibit the transfer of U.S. cluster bombs to Ukraine failed in a lopsided 147-276 vote. Greene's largely symbolic amendment — cluster munitions have already been delivered to Ukraine following Biden's decision — was supported by 98 Republicans and 49 Democrats.

Lawmakers rebuffed Rep. Matt Gaetz's effort to block any diversity, equity and inclusion training after nine Republicans sided with Democrats.

And Rep. Bob Good (R-Va.) came up well short in his bid to defund a congressionally mandated commission tasked with renaming Army bases and military property named in honor of Confederate leaders. The effort was largely symbolic as the panel has finished its work and most Army bases have already scrubbed Confederate names. Still, the measure garnered 177 votes from House Republicans.

In all, the legislation authorizes \$886 billion for national defense programs in fiscal 2024, the same amount requested by President Joe Biden and equal to a spending cap set for defense spending in a recent debt limit deal.

The price tag includes \$842 billion for the Pentagon and another \$32 billion for nuclear weapons programs at the Energy Department. The legislation doesn't actually provide any funding, however, and must be followed by appropriations legislation.

Joe Gould and Sarah Ferris contributed to this report.

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