

I Am Not a "Rogue"

The Chief of Engineers, Lt. General Robert Flowers, appeared before a US Senate subcommittee in mid-March to deny that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has become a "rogue agency, out of control, too cozy with Congress and living by its own rules." Just as with Richard Nixon's famous claim, "I am not a crook," any bureaucrat who feels compelled to deny he is a rogue probably is one.

This strange (and strained) testimony culminates a year-long saga which began when one of the Corps' top economists came forward to say that the agency was "cooking the books" on cost-benefit studies in order to justify building large scale civic works projects, such as dams and bigger locks for barges. That economist, Dr. Donald Sweeney, submitted an affidavit accompanied by a raft of incriminating e-mails and memos written by top Corps generals and civilian managers.

In December, Sweeney's allegations were verified by an Army Inspector General investigation which recommended discipline against two generals and a colonel. Incredibly, the Army went beyond Sweeney's specific charges and found the entire Corps planning process to be broken, infected by bias and driven by a short-sighted effort to "Grow the Corps."

In early February, a study by the National Academy of Sciences concluded that Sweeney was also right on the economics and, among other things, recommended that future Corps studies be subject to independent technical review.

The Clinton Administration's outgoing Secretary of the Army asked the incoming Chief of Engineers to come up with a plan to fix the problem. Unfortunately, this was like asking an arsonist to design a fire prevention program.

Flowers began his testimony with the startling assertion that the fundamental problem with Corps economic studies is economists. The general tried to stand the National Academy of Sciences study on its head by using it as a basis for abandoning new, more sophisticated economic models and returning to "the economics of the past." In fact, the Academy praised the new models saying, "The problem lies not in the ...models but in their implementation and data used as input." That was exactly what Don Sweeney had said: Corps officers ordered changes in the numbers fed into the model in order to reach a predetermined conclusion that construction was economically justified.

From this dubious premise, Flowers declared that the new study on the Upper Mississippi lock system will be placed in the hands of yet another general. Given that two generals just got disciplined for manipulating the last study, this "reform" hardly inspires confidence. Presumably, the new general will be far more circumspect in what he writes in his e-mails.

Finally, on the topic of independent review, Flowers proposes that a "group of senior Corps leaders" would consult outside experts as appropriate. In other words, the Corps will continue to control the scope and use of any outside input. Sure sounds independent.

Not surprisingly, Flowers sent a videotape of his testimony to every Corps District office across the country so the troops can see how he "spoke out in defense of the Corps."

The Corps is a complex agency and many of the civilian specialists are superb, the best at what they do not only in the country but the world. With its changing roles and a growing awareness of the environmental consequences of its activities, the Corps needs a new, more open leadership committed to actually addressing the problems identified by these outside reviews and not just mouthing defensive slogans. In other words, the Corps needs a Chief of Engineers who will be a coach, not a cheerleader.

In its first budget blueprint, the Bush Administration proposed that the Corps be cut back far more than any other federal agency -- 14 %, or about \$600 million a year -- and suggested independent technical review for the agency's planning and other checks against continued empire-building. The new Secretary of the Army and the other civilian leaders whose job it will be to oversee the Corps are not yet in place but, once confirmed, they face a big job reining in an unrepentant, rampaging rogue.

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