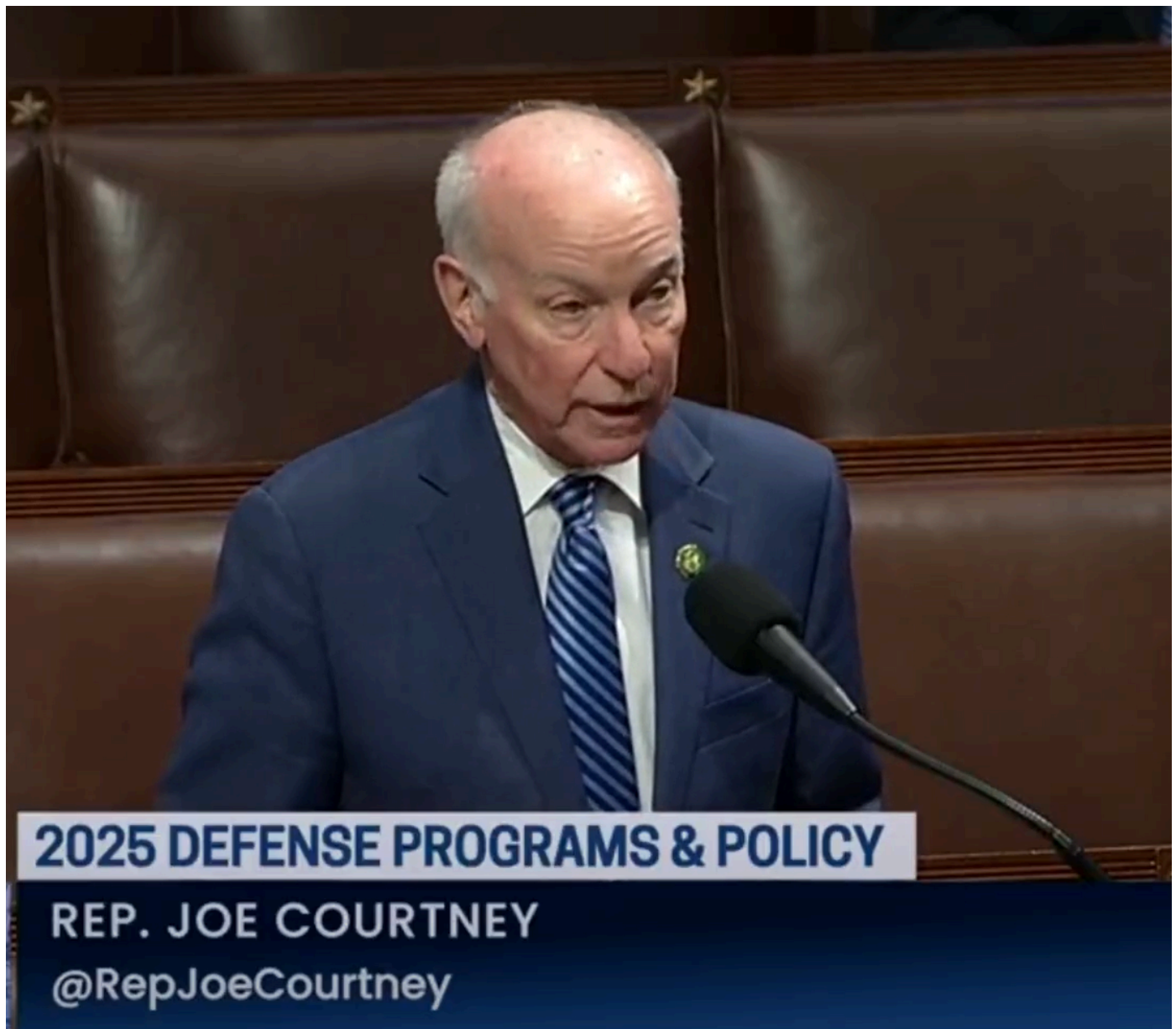


Politics

# Connecticut's Congressional Reps Vote Down Defense Bill, as Culture Wars Overtake Bipartisan Legislation

— Juliann Ventura, 6.21.2024



Rep. Joe Courtney talks on the House floor about Republican amendments to the defense bill (Credit C-SPAN)

WASHINGTON, D.C. — All of Connecticut's congressional representatives — along with nearly every other House Democrat — voted against the annual

defense bill last week in response to a series of Republican amendments to the bill that Democrats have called poison pills.

“They’re using our military, who we should be supporting across the board, as really, almost a political plaything, to advance their culture war agenda,” Rep. Joe Courtney charged in an interview with CT Examiner.

Until last year, the bill – which establishes defense policies, authorizes appropriations for the defense department, and addresses other defense-related activities – had been passed with large bipartisan support.

“The culture war is escalating and... you have very vehement disagreement among the two political tribes about right and wrong,” Justin Logan said, the director of defense and foreign policy studies at the conservative-leaning Cato Institute.

Last year, House Republicans tacked on similar provisions, which led to lengthy negotiations between the House and Senate, stripping some of the GOP-backed measures.

This year, House Republicans are targeting Biden administration policies ensuring that service members are reimbursed for the travel costs of obtaining an abortion, providing gender-affirming care, and positions in diversity, equity and inclusion.

“It’s like stoking the flames, or, even worse probably, it’s like throwing a little bomb into, or lighting a match under, this defense bill to make it a carrier for this thing that unites Republicans,” said Sarah Binder, a senior fellow in governance studies at centrist Brookings Institution. “This is what they can rally around, but it really kind of tosses this torch into what eventually has to be worked out on a serious, bipartisan basis.”

Connecticut’s lawmakers each denounced the amendments, saying that they couldn’t support the bill as amended.

Rep. Rosa DeLauro said in a statement that the House majority added “numerous poison pill riders that distract from the intent of the bill, which is strengthening our national security.”

She added that the legislation with the amendments “promotes chaos in Congress over prioritizing our national security, and which sows division instead of supporting our service members’ morale and unity.”

Rep. Jim Himes agreed, saying in a statement that, “Republican leadership has refused to take this critical legislation seriously and allowed the adoption of dozens of toxic amendments.”

House Republicans generally applauded the amended bill, which passed the House by a 217-199 vote.

In a **statement** released on X, House Speaker Mike Johnson said the legislation would strengthen the country’s national security.

“This year’s NDAA will refocus our military on its core mission of defending America and its interests across the globe, fund the deployment of the National Guard to the southwest border, expedite innovation and reduce the acquisition timeline for new weaponry, support our allies, and strengthen our nuclear posture and missile defense programs,” said Johnson.

Mike Rogers, an Alabama Republican and chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, released a statement that the bill would help the country “stay ahead of our adversaries.”

Six Democrats – Henry Cuellar (D-Texas), Donald Davis (D-N.C.), Jared Golden (D-Maine), Vicente Gonzalez (D-Texas), Mary Sattler Peltola (D-Alaska.), and Marie Gluesenkamp Perez (D-Wash.) – **voted** in favor of the amended bill. Three Republicans – Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.), Thomas Massie (R-Ky.), Rosendale (R-Mont.) – voted **no**.

Meanwhile, the Democrat-controlled Senate Armed Services committee passed a dueling version of the bill, by a 22-3 vote. Negotiations between the House and Senate will likely happen later this year.

Molly Reynolds, also from The Brookings Institution, told CT Examiner that must-pass legislation has become a magnet for members of Congress to advance their political agendas.

“There are fewer pieces of legislation that are open for amendments in the house, and so when one does, there’s a lot more interest among members in using that vehicle to try and make their political points,” Reynolds said. “That’s sort of why all that energy gets funneled to the NDAA.”

But Logan attributed the polarized dynamic as a product of government power and overreach, with no happy medium between the political bases.

“The defense department is going to pay for the health care of people who work for the defense department,” Logan offered as an example, “So, if you define abortion as health care, it’s going to pay for that. If you don’t, it’s not going to pay for that. And whether abortion is health care or whether it’s taking a human life, is a very fundamental disagreement.”

It’s highly unlikely that President Biden would sign a bill including the Republican amendments, said Binder, but the bill’s passage through the Senate could be rocky.

“It puts a little more onus, burden on the Senate to make sure that their bill is clean of these types of measures, but it also will give a lift to ‘Republican cultural warriors’ in the Senate who might want to carry the flag and try to push it onto the Senate defense bill,” Binder said.

She also predicted that the Republican amendments could put House Republicans in districts previously won by Biden, in a bind during the fall elections.

“Some of them go a step too far for some of these Republicans who are sitting in districts that were won by Joe Biden and might be a little more concerned about just running with Republicans on those roads,” Binder said.

**Juliann Ventura** 

 [juliannventura2024@u.northwestern.edu](mailto:juliannventura2024@u.northwestern.edu)