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HEADLINE: Firefighters protest **Bush** decision to withhold money to fight terrorism

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DATELINE: WASHINGTON

BODY:

The International Association of Fire Fighters is considering boycotting the annual national memorial service for fallen firefighters to protest President **Bush's** decision to withhold money that would help fire departments.

Bush said Friday he had a strong commitment to firefighters, but needed to cut federal spending.

"What they ought to be upset about is the fact that Congress tried to tie my hands," **Bush** said. "They said, 'You've got to spend \$5 billion or none of the \$5 billion.' And I chose not to spend the \$5 billion because, one, we didn't need to and, two, it is important for this country to be fiscally disciplined as our economy begins to recover." The president withheld \$5.1 billion, including \$100 **million** for improvements to communications systems for firefighters, police officers and other emergency personnel. Rescue workers' efforts on Sept. 11 at the World Trade Center were hindered because the agencies' radios could not communicate with each other.

Bush also blocked \$90 **million** for long-term health monitoring of emergency workers at Ground Zero and \$150 **million** for equipment and training grants to fire departments.

A sponsor of legislation creating the grant program, Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., asked **Bush** Friday to reconsider his decision.

"Our nation's firefighters play a critical role in ensuring homeland security, and your decision to block the release of these funds - while applications are still pending - is, in my view, misguided," Dodd wrote to **Bush**.

At its convention in Las Vegas earlier this week, the union voted to ask its president to formally protest **Bush's** decision. Among the options: Boycotting the annual service in memory of fallen firefighters, scheduled for Oct. 6 in Washington. **Bush** has been invited to speak at the event.

"I did get the message loud and clear," said Harold Schaitberger, the union's general president. "My members are angry about this **veto** and they do not want to let the president use their image for his political benefit any longer. This **veto** is a slap in the face to every firefighter across this country."

Other options include writing a letter to the White House, lobbying Congress to override **Bush's** decision, or holding a protest in Washington.

Delegates to the convention also voted to return **Bush's** videotaped message to the meeting.

"Don't lionize our fallen brothers in one breath, and then stab us in the back by eliminating funding for our members to fight terrorism and stay safe," Schaitberger said. "President **Bush**, you are either with us or against us. You can't have it both ways."

The union has given almost \$2 **million** to federal candidates since Jan. 1, 1999, with more than 80 percent going to Democrats.

On the Net:

International Association of Fire Fighters: <http://www.iaff.org>

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