Simmons backs ‘military-industrial complex’

By Stephen Singer
Associated Press

STORRS — U.S. Rep. Robert Simmons on Friday urged an audience of scientists and engineers to back a strong relationship between industry and the military that President Dwight Eisenhower warned against 42 years ago.

Simmons, R-2nd District, said the dramatically increased level of terrorist threats since the end of the Cold War has forced changes in how government does business.

“We cannot be wary of the military-industrial complex,” he said at a homeland security conference organized by the University of Connecticut’s School of Engineering. “In fact, we should embrace what they do. It’s not enough in this environment to rely simply on government.”

Eisenhower, in his farewell address to the nation in January 1961, urged Americans to reject what became known as the military-industrial complex — “the conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry,” as he called it.

The acceleration of U.S. troops into Vietnam in the 1960s left Eisenhower’s warning in tatters.

But America’s Cold War focus on containing the Soviet threat was no preparation for the war against shadowy terrorist groups, Simmons said.

“These terrorists in the past would take a hostage. What’s that compared to nuclear war with the Soviet Union?” he asked. “Now, they’ve increased in lethality.”

The UConn conference mixed anti-terror technology with public policy. Simmons said the failure by previous U.S. presidents to retaliate against attacks may have led al-Qaida to believe President Bush would not order the military strikes in October 2001 that toppled Afghanistan’s Taliban regime.

“Why would it not seem logical that even after 9-11 we would do nothing?” Simmons asked. “What do they expect us to do? Sue them? Who could have guessed at our response after 9-11?”

The two-term congressman said “in most cases there was no response or a limited response” to previous terrorist attacks.

One exception, Simmons said after his talk, was President Ronald Reagan’s decision in April 1986 to bomb Tripoli, Libya, in a strike against that country’s dictator, Moammar Gadhafi.

Sean O’Keefe, NASA administrator, said agencies must learn to cooperate by studying how federal, state, and local authorities coordinated their search for the wreckage of the Columbia shuttle that disintegrated on re-entry on Feb. 1.

“We made it up as we went along,” he said, referring to communications among numerous government agencies.

NASA and others learned from the explosion of the Challenger in January 1986, O’Keefe said.

“We learned a lot from that experience, and a lot was not good, frankly,” he said.

“There was no end of arguments between and among government jurisdictions over the question. While everyone fought, eight weeks went by before anything was salvaged.”

The search involved the governors of Texas and Louisiana and “mobilized every asset of their states,” he said. “We had folks on the ground in Texas in a matter of hours. It turned exclusively on the willingness of people to work together.”