

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

China trade deal in trouble, Senators warn

While improving trade ties with China generally has had broad support in both the House and the Senate, developments in late February have raised alarm bells on Capitol Hill, that approving China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) may not be a simple affair. During a Senate Finance Committee hearing on Feb. 23, committee chairman William Roth (R-Del.) warned that WTO accession and the passage of permanent normal trade relations (NTR) by the Senate "is not a foregone conclusion." Roth said that "China's reckless threat to use force against Taiwan over negotiations on the future of cross-strait relations," is only one reason.

There are also mixed signals coming from the Clinton administration itself. On China, Roth said, "the President has been the strongest possible advocate for a WTO deal." However, Roth noted, Vice President Al Gore has promised organized labor that, if a deal is not reached this year, he will rewrite the agreement in a way that will not be acceptable to China. "Those statements," Roth said, "raise serious questions about the administration's commitment to getting this deal done." Roth was echoed by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.), who said of Gore's stance, "We need to know that the administration disavows any such suggestion, that they want a bill now, and they will fight for it now, and they will help us get it for them now."

Roth and Moynihan put U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky on the defensive. "The administration is absolutely united" behind the WTO agreement and permanent NTR for China, she claimed, and Gore "fully supports" the agreement "as negotiated." Barshefsky's assurances

did not satisfy Moynihan, who warned, "You're going to lose this." Moynihan and Roth demanded "a clear signal" from the White House, which would help them move legislation implementing the agreement.

Other members of the committee focussed on parochial concerns. Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) and Jay Rockefeller (D-W.V.) expressed concern about trade in wheat and steel, respectively. Conrad told Barshefsky that the Chinese "are skating desperately close to sending us a message that they're quick to sign agreements but they're slow to keep their promises."

Specter, Torricelli propose FISA reform

On Feb. 24, Sens. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and Bob Torricelli (D-N.J.) introduced a bill to require the Attorney General to personally review Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) warrant requests, when those requests are made by the Director of the FBI. If the Attorney General turns down the FBI Director's request, then she must explain that rejection in writing. The bill was inspired by events in the investigation and indictment of former Los Alamos nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee, who has been subjected to a wholesale politically motivated legal assault.

Specter explained, in remarks on the Senate floor on Feb. 24, that when FBI Director Louis Freeh, through a representative he sent to meet with Attorney General Janet Reno on Aug. 12, 1997, requested such a warrant in the Wen Ho Lee case, Reno turned the matter over to a subordinate with no experience in such requests, who subsequently rejected it, and there the matter lay until November 1998. Spec-

ter said that the 16 months from the time the FBI initiated the request until November 1998, were "very crucial with respect to the activities of Dr. Lee."

Torricelli said that the bill maintains the current standards of probable cause for requesting surveillance warrants under FISA, and adds further accountability. "We simply want to know," he said, "that the standard which has always existed will be used, that procedures will be followed, that people will be held accountable, not that government is any more or any less intrusive."

Iran non-proliferation act passed by Senate

On Feb. 24, the Senate unanimously passed a bill that targets U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China relations by requiring the President to report all known transfers of technology to Iran that may have application to nuclear and missile weapons programs. The bill does not require sanctioning of individuals and agencies involved in such transfers, but its language makes it unlikely that the President would decide against sanctions.

The bill would hold hostage Russian participation in the International Space Station, by withholding U.S. payments to the Russian Aviation and Space Agency, unless the President certifies that the Russian government is actively opposing the "proliferation to Iran of weapons of mass destruction and missile systems capable of delivering such weapons." The only exceptions are for crew safety and for the Russian-built service module, without which the station can't function.

The bill, which was passed by the House last September by a vote of 419-

0, is a slightly weaker version of a bill that President Clinton vetoed in 1998 that, rather than merely "authorizing" sanctions, required them. At the time, Clinton did sanction seven Russian agencies in the hopes that the veto would not be overridden. Clinton assured Congressional leaders at that time, that Russia was cooperating and would make progress.

However, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) indicated in floor remarks on Feb. 22, that nobody in Congress is satisfied that Russia is making "progress." Russia is "not making progress and this dangerous transfer of technology that could lead to proliferation of nuclear weapons continues," he said. He noted the recent parliamentary elections in Iran, and suggested that "it appears reformers have been making some gains," and "relations with Iran will change as a result of that." However, he insisted that "the danger is still there."

Lott said that the bill authorizes sanctions but does not require them. "If we do not see some actions by the administration," he said, "then we may want to go that next step."

Rally supports anti-hunger bills

More evidence that things are not so well in the economy as Wall Street claims, leaked out on Feb. 29, during a rally by a coalition of anti-hunger and pro-immigrant groups, which was joined by several members of Congress. The rally was in support of the Hunger Relief Act, introduced in both Houses last October.

At the time, Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) said that the goals of the legislation were "to promote self-sufficiency and the transition from wel-

fare to work, and to eradicate childhood hunger by increasing the availability of food stamps to low-income working families." The bill repeals many of the provisions of the 1996 welfare reform bill that restricted access to food stamps for immigrants, and it eases Federal restrictions on the value of a vehicle that a family can own and still receive food stamps.

The gist of the remarks at the rally was that, given the alleged economic boom, there is no reason why there should be hungry people in America today, yet, according to statistics compiled by a variety of agencies, as many as 36 million people, 10% of all households, lack secure access to enough food for a healthy life. Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) called it "shocking" that there are hungry people in America. He said that it is "shameful" that someone has to choose between food stamps and having transportation to get to their job. Rep. Tony Hall (D-Ohio) said that there are enough resources in the country to say that "nobody will ever have to go to bed hungry in this country today." All that's lacking, he said, is the will. Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) condemned the fact that there has been a tremendous decline in the food stamp program, but there hasn't been a comparable decline in poverty.

OPEC blamed for high oil prices

A couple of days after some 500 commercial truck drivers drove their rigs to Capitol Hill to protest high diesel fuel prices on Feb. 22, Sen. Ben Campbell (R-Colo.) introduced legislation to temporarily suspend the 24¢ per gallon Federal excise tax on diesel fuel. He told the Senate that with diesel fuel

approaching \$2 per gallon, many independent truckers are facing bankruptcy. He said that the protesting truck drivers don't want handouts, only work. "If those rigs stop rolling," he said, "the nation stops rolling, too."

As has been the fashion of late, Campbell blamed the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries for the price rise, and decried the fact that 55% of U.S. oil consumption is imported. Campbell's bill, however, which has the support of the leadership of both parties, does not address the long-term supply situation, but is intended to "ease the burden on so many Americans based on our lack of a national long-term energy policy," by providing temporary relief for truckers, farmers, and public transportation.

The next day, Sens. James Jeffords (R-Vt.) and Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) announced that they would push for a policy they claim to be a long-term solution. They announced that they would be introducing legislation to give tax credits to domestically produced "clean" fuels, i.e., highly inefficient solar, wind, and biomass power, which they claimed would offset "millions of barrels" of imported oil.

Lieberman indicated that panic is developing as a result of the skyrocketing price of oil. He said that the recent testimony of Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan "leads me to conclude that we are still at serious risk of a dangerous cycle of prolonged oil-price increases leading to creeping inflation rates, leading to corresponding hikes in interest rates, leading to an end to our historic run of economic growth." Lieberman also backed proposals to open the Strategic Petroleum Reserve and step up pressure on oil-producing countries to increase their output.