

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

White House tries to cool porno dispute

The White House has asked Congress to reauthorize the National Endowment for the Arts without restrictions for one year, while a commission reviews the NEA's grant-making procedures, which have included funds for pornographic "art."

Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) attacked the NEA funding of the erotic photographs of homosexual photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and an exhibit that included a photograph by Andres Serrano of a crucifix submerged in urine. In the midst of that controversy, President Bush in March gave NEA chairman John Frohnmayer a public vote of confidence and called for a full five-year reauthorization of the NEA without restrictions.

Faced with heavy opposition, according to one official, the administration's goal is "to let the noise level die down."

Legislators were angry about not being consulted by the White House. Rep. Pat Williams (D-Mont.), chairman of the House subcommittee responsible for the NEA authorization, commented, "Before the White House begins to legislate on this, they really ought to communicate directly with [Rep.] Tom [Coleman (R-Mo.)] and myself, other members of our committees, as well as the leadership on the Democratic and Republican side. To do less than that shows political naiveté and will result in serious political mischief."

Representative Coleman, who serves on the subcommittee, called the Bush plan the "wrong proposal at the wrong time." "The administration is like a car careening from one side of the road to the other," he said.

Sen. James McClure (R-Id.), ranking Republican on the Senate subcommittee working on the NEA budget, told reporters on June 6 that he is

"almost certain" Congress will insist on some funding restrictions. McClure said he would not vote to reauthorize the NEA for one year unless there is "restrictive language" in the bill.

Gun control bill meeting stiff opposition

Senate leaders on June 5-7 failed to mobilize the necessary votes to close off debate on a plethora of amendments offered to the Omnibus Crime Bill. The main reason for the opposition is the partial ban on assault weapons in the bill.

The bill also toughens the use of the death penalty and restricts the possibility of appeal for prisoners on Death Row.

The gun ban, which was approved by the Senate on May 23, has met with strong opposition from the National Rifle Association. Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Me.) tried to close off debate on amendments on June 5, but the 54 to 37 vote was six votes short of the 60 needed. Again on June 7, supporters were only able to mobilize 57 votes for cloture.

HUD to call for cuts in home loans

Sources within the Department of Housing and Urban Development indicate that HUD Secretary Jack Kemp will ask Congress to impose a 0.5% loan assessment on Federal Housing Administration (FHA) buyers who provide less than a 10% down payment on their homes, and to require those borrowers to pay two-thirds of the closing costs up front, in cash.

The FHA presently allows buyers to finance closing costs, which can run

to several thousand dollars, as a way to encourage home ownership among lower-income families. The HUD proposals would cut by up to 70,000 the number of low- and middle-income buyers who could qualify for assistance.

HUD is also proposing tightening lending standards and an increased monitoring of lenders while improving the process of selling properties the FHA has taken through foreclosure. FHA is being hit by the collapse of the speculative real estate market and has been plagued by a backlog of unsold foreclosed properties during the last 10 years.

HUD released on June 6 a report by the accounting firm Price Waterhouse, which estimates that the Mutual Mortgage Insurance Fund—which provides single-family home loans—had a net worth of \$2.6 billion in 1989, down from \$8 billion in 1979. The FHA lost \$4.2 billion in 1988 and continues to lose \$350 million a year in its single-family loan programs. Although the fund is solvent, projected losses would soon wipe out its reserves. The fund insures 600,000 mortgages.

Opposition grows to China MFN status

In a looming battle between the Congress and the administration, leading Democrats are warning that they are not pleased with President Bush's attempt to renew Most Favored Nation trading status for the People's Republic of China.

In remarks on the House floor on May 24, Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) noted that the "leadership in Beijing has snubbed" President Bush's overtures since last July, and that the "Chinese government intimidation of Chinese students in this

country continues, including revoking passports, intrusive surveillance, termination of government stipends, restricting contact with family members, firing those with jobs back home, and revoking their special student status." Kennedy said it would, under these circumstances, be "preposterous" to grant MFN status.

When Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov, in a meeting with congressmen at the Soviet Embassy in Washington on June 1, pointed to Bush's granting of MFN status to China as a reason to also grant it to the Soviet Union, Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Me.) indicated that the China proposal would be a matter of controversy when it came up for Senate consideration.

Conservatives have also expressed their disappointment with the Bush decision. Sen. Gordon Humphrey (R-N.H.) commented on May 24 that the U.S. must again begin acting on the basis of principle, as it did when it revoked MFN status for Poland when martial law was imposed in 1982.

On June 5, Chinese student leader Chai Ling testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that any accommodation to the Chinese regime "strengthens and emboldens the hardliners and weakens the reformers." Asked by Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) whether Congress should renew MFN status for China, she said it should be linked to some conditions for human rights improvement. "The best way is to connect these," she said.

AIDS infected can be barred from food-handling

In a slight shift in policy on the AIDS epidemic, the Senate joined the House in agreeing to permit employers to transfer workers who are carriers of

the AIDS virus out of food-handling jobs. The move is in stark contrast to the major anti-discrimination protection for the disabled that is nearing final approval in Congress.

Voting 53 to 41 on June 7, the Senate first refused to kill, and then approved by voice vote, a proposal from Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) to instruct Senate conferees to agree to the food-handlers provision, which would require employers to make "reasonable accommodation" for alternative employment.

Opponents characterized the measure as a politically inspired concession to public fears about AIDS, claiming that the fatal disease cannot be transmitted through food. Supporters of the bill pointed to the fact that public opinion is strongly in favor of such measures. "The reality is that people who have communicable diseases should not be working at the salad bar," said Sen. William L. Armstrong (R-Colo.).

House okays Soviet trade bill with proviso

The House of Representatives on June 6 passed a bill by a 312 to 86 vote that would speed up the transfer of Western technology to the Soviet Union and the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe.

The House tagged on an amendment to the bill which would deny the Soviets the higher levels of technology until President Bush certifies to Congress that the Soviets have entered into "serious negotiations" with Lithuania's duly elected government and are conducting these talks without coercion. The amendment, introduced by Rep. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) and passed on a 390 to 24 vote, would effectively freeze current restrictions.

The House bill would allow the

U.S. to sell to the Soviet Union and East European countries computers with a capacity of 550 megabytes of information per second. Current rules set a limit of 78 megabytes per second. The legislation would permit East European nations—and the Soviet Union under some conditions—to buy some U.S. mainframes as well as most personal computers available in the West.

Budget summit at a standstill

The White House and Congress resumed deficit-reduction negotiations but are in disagreement over how to proceed as spending bills for the Energy, State, Justice, and Commerce departments are slated to come before House Appropriations subcommittees on June 7.

The Democratic leadership backed away from a high-profile fight over a resolution to first formalize discretionary spending levels for the new fiscal year. House Speaker Thomas Foley (D-Wash.), according to several sources cited by the *Wall Street Journal*, received a phone call from White House Chief of Staff John Sununu, who apparently raised the prospect of President Bush's going on television to accuse the Democrats of scuttling the budget talks.

Foley is coming under growing criticism that he, unlike former Speaker Rep. Jim Wright (D-Tex.), is too conciliatory. Many Democrats feel that such an attitude will damage Democratic chances in this year's elections. Some Democrats suspect that the administration's refusal to act on the discretionary spending resolution indicates that the White House wants an excuse to walk out of the talks.