

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

Gingrich launches attack on NASA

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) attacked the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, saying that NASA should have been disbanded after the Apollo program ended in the 1970s, in a lecture on Feb. 4 at Reinhardt College in Waleska, Ga.

"The government can do basic research and development or the government can come out here and set up the Apollo project," Gingrich said. "Remember, NASA was brand new. They built it up, they did it, and if they'd disbanded it at that point, I think they'd have been better off. You build a project team, you get the job done, and then you close it and start a new project. If you keep people there, they become obsolescent; they become bureaucratic." He did not say what he thought should be done with NASA now.

Deficit hawks zero in on entitlements

On ABC's "This Week with David Brinkley" on Feb. 5, Senate Budget Committee Chairman Pete Domenici (R-N.M.) and House Budget Committee Chairman John Kasich (R-Ohio) agreed that the budget which the President was to present the following day was soft on entitlements.

"The bottom line is they refused to deal with entitlements," Kasich said, "and we are going to have to, if we are going to get to zero over seven years in terms of a balanced budget."

"This budget clearly lacks courage," complained Domenici.

Kasich admitted that "there's going to be a lot of screaming and yelling and complaining and crying" as a result of the GOP proposals, which they still have not revealed, but claimed that these would primarily be coming from "lobbyists" rather than constitu-

ents. Domenici didn't want to use the word "cut" with regard to the programs targeted. "Most of the programs you talk about in terms of cuts—Medicare, Medicaid, welfare—we're not talking about less spending every year. We're talking about slowing the growth in spending in virtually all of these entitlement programs," he said.

Dorgan proposes reform of Federal Reserve

On Feb. 2, the day Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan raised interest rates for the seventh time in a year, Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) called on Congress to reform the Fed.

The Fed is a secretive operation, Dorgan said, unveiling a chart with pictures of the members of the Fed board. Some of these people are chosen by the President and approved by the Senate, while others are chosen by the local Federal Reserve banks and represent the interests of private banks.

Dorgan outlined four provisions for reform. First, that "nobody ought to vote on monetary policy . . . in any room, locked or unlocked, unless they are accountable to the American people," and since the regional Fed presidents who sit on the Federal Open Market Committee are accountable to no one but private bankers, "no regional Fed Bank president ought to have a vote on that committee."

Second, Dorgan called for immediate disclosure of Fed decisions as they are made. Third, the budget of the Federal Reserve Board should be published as part of the budget of the United States. And finally, the Fed board should meet regularly with the Executive branch, especially the treasury secretary, so that monetary policy and fiscal policy can be coordinated.

Citing *Washington Post* comments that "many Wall Street analysts praise the course of Fed policy," Dorgan said: "Of course they praise the Fed policy. Who do you think the Feds are working for? It is not Main Street, it is not the family farmer, not the rancher, not the working person out there. . . . We know who their constituency is . . . but it is different from our constituency, and that is the dilemma." He characterized the Fed as a "dinosaur which reform has got to begin to touch."

Judiciary panel okays anti-crime block grants

The House Judiciary Committee on Feb. 2 approved, on a near party-line vote, a program which would provide local governments with \$10 billion in block grants. The legislation would effectively dismantle the crime bill which was passed by Congress last year and signed into law by the President. That bill provided funds for 100,000 police officers, specialized drug courts, and prevention programs. The new bill would leave it up to the individual states and the local governments as to how they would spend the money.

This is a significant step toward the defederalization of the United States, propagated by the conservative Republicans' "Contract with America." This was admitted by House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde (R-Ill.). "It's the defining issue between the parties," he said, "whether we're going to have local or federal control."

Supporters of the new bill believe that local and state governments will be less likely to fund the preventive measures in last year's crime bill, which they castigated as "pork." They instead want stronger punitive measures, including introduction of evi-

dence based on an illegal search, if that search were done in "good faith."

The Republican proposals would expand the number of crimes subject to the death penalty, lengthen prison terms for "violent crimes," and short-circuit the *habeas corpus* process, setting more stringent limits on such procedures for death row inmates. The legislation calling for mandatory "victim restitution," i.e., the criminal making good whatever the "victim" had suffered as a result of the crime, passed the House on Feb. 7 in a 431-0 vote.

Teller: develop high-temperature reactors

Nuclear physicist Edward Teller proposed to shift the emphasis of the Department of Energy (DOE) "to *obviously* safe reactors," in a House Appropriations Energy and Water subcommittee hearing on Jan. 31 on the future of the department. These should be based on modifications to General Atomics' high-temperature gas-cooled reactor, he said. If placed 300 feet underground and with automated controls, these reactors would shut down automatically and require no "human access." Accidents like Three Mile Island and Chernobyl would be avoided.

Teller said that placing reactors underground would make them proliferation-proof, because it would be virtually impossible for anyone to get into them. "Thus, Third World countries can be given such reactors for their legitimate energy needs, even if their political stability is not completely assured," he said.

Teller bemoaned the fact that the DOE has practically stopped all development and research on nuclear reactors for electricity production. "It is mistakenly stated that nuclear elec-

tricity is necessarily expensive," he said. But "successful work abroad, particularly in France and Japan, proves the contrary." The real problem, he explained, was the demand for risk-free technology.

Republicans have long targeted the DOE for extinction, because it has been turned into an anti-technology haven since it superseded the Atomic Energy Commission; but Teller offered instead that its activity should be reoriented.

Teller also criticized the amount of time and money being put into nuclear and chemical "cleanup." He said that a "science-centered program to investigate the actual consequences of low-level radiation exposures should be instituted to give any subsequent cleanup program a rational basis."

McConnell's planned cuts in Africa aid draw fire

On Feb. 3, the Constituency for Africa, chaired by former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young and seconded by Rep. Robert Payne (D-N.J.), announced the formation of a coalition to fight for the preservation and expansion of U.S. foreign aid programs for Africa. "We're here to call attention to the fact that there is an Africa policy" from the Clinton administration, Young said. "We want the Congress not to lose sight of that fact."

Young criticized Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), who has introduced a bill to drastically cut foreign aid for Africa on the basis that "African leaders steal the aid." "McConnell's reasons are ten years old," said Young. "Aid was stolen when Africa was a pawn in the Cold War."

Young called U.S. foreign aid to Africa a good investment: "Everybody profits by a strong relationship

with Africa. This is the richest and most underpopulated continent in the world." In fact, he said, there's so much work that needs to be done there, "you might see another wave of immigration from Holland to Africa."

Byrd flails balanced budget amendment

Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.V.) continued his assault on the balanced budget amendment, which he scored as unconstitutional and a fraud, in floor comments on Feb. 9. Byrd demanded, "How will you know if this amendment will be good for the nation if you do not know what cuts will be made, how much each state, each county, each municipality across the land will have to absorb as a result of the cuts, how much your state taxes will rise as a result of federal cuts?"

Byrd said that if defense, Social Security, and interest on the federal debt were exempted from cuts, as has been proposed, the remaining budget (Medicare, state and local grants, and the rest of the federal government) would have to be cut 30% in order to balance the budget by the year 2002. "No one can honestly come to this floor . . . and tell the people of America that they will escape real pain under the amendment."

Appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press" on Feb. 5, Byrd attacked the economic consequences of the amendment: "As to its being bad economic policy, it would severely damage the nation's ability to develop a sane, sensible fiscal policy. It would cripple efforts to stabilize the business cycle, in that it would create a severe fiscal drag on the economy at a time when the economy may already be weak. It would hamper the capacity of the nation to make long-term investments in physical and human infrastructure."