

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

House panel takes the axe to social spending

In keeping with their Contract with America, Republicans on the House Appropriations subcommittee responsible for the departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services imposed massive cuts on the budgets of these institutions, eliminating rural housing loans, nutrition programs for children and pregnant women, and assistance to the poor and elderly for protecting their homes against the cold. Subcommittee Chairman John Porter (R-Ill.) said that 84 programs will be eliminated.

David Obey (D-Wisc.), the ranking Democrat on the committee, warned that the cuts were making way for "somebody's capital gains tax," referring to Republican promises to reduce capital gains taxes. Obey said that the proposals would eliminate 125,000 summer jobs this year and deprive 6 million low-income households of heating assistance.

The Republican proposal is aimed at eliminating the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance program. In addition, a \$4.2 billion rollback of spending previously agreed on hit some of President Clinton's pet programs, such as job-training and education.

Also on Feb. 23, Republicans on the House Economic and Educational Opportunities Committee passed a measure that would end the national school lunch program and distribute the money to the states for them to decide how to use. At a meeting with House Democrats on Feb. 22, President Clinton said that it would be a "terrible mistake" to end the free meals in schools for poor children, a program that House Republicans were trying to put a spending ceiling on. "We have no intention of abandoning the American people to unproven theories and extreme positions," the President said.

"We're going to stick up for people," House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.) said. Speaking together with the President, Gephardt called the Republican cuts "mean-spirited" and "wrong." "They won't help our people," he said.

Unity among the Republicans over the extent of the austerity package started to crack, with Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, recommending on Feb. 24 that the Republicans abandon attempts to replace the food stamp program with direct cash payments to the states. "We want one program at least to be a safety net for people who are truly needy," Roberts said.

GOPers defy Clinton veto on freeze of regulations

House Republicans approved on Feb. 24 a bill that would put a one-year freeze on new federal regulations, ranging from food safety ordinances to nuclear waste disposal. In the vote, 51 Democrats joined 225 Republicans to send the bill to the Senate, where it is liable to meet stiffer opposition. The President is expected to veto the measure.

Although the bill automatically exempts what it calls routine regulations, it is still unclear to how many items exactly the strictures will apply. The freeze is to remain in effect until the end of the year or until Congress enacts permanent restrictions on the government's regulatory authority.

Republicans hope to override a veto in the House, but admit that the legislation awaits a much more uncertain fate in the Senate. One of the items exempted by the Republicans is the stipulations needed to regulate the duck-hunting season. In the House de-

bate, the bill was broadened to include a freeze on rules related to the Endangered Species Act.

New ethics charges plague House Speaker

Three House Democrats filed a complaint on Feb. 23 that Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) violated the rules of the House and federal law by accepting up to \$200,000 in free television time from a cable TV operator with business interests pending before Congress.

The three Democrats, Patricia Schroeder (Colo.), Cynthia McKinney (Ga.), and Harry Johnston (Fla.) called on the ethics panel to determine whether a cable station's airing of Gingrich's college course may not constitute an illegal gift. The cable company, Mind Extension University, which has begun airing the speaker's classes, is a part of the Alexandria, Virginia-based Jones Intercable. Jones Intercable has numerous issues before Congress, including a request to waive a 1987 bill so that it can purchase the Public Broadcast Corp., whose funding House Republicans recently cut.

Gingrich is interested in eliminating federal funding for public broadcasting and throwing it out on the private market. Jones Intercable is interested in purchasing Mind Extension University, which beams college courses to 26 million households nationwide. It provided Gingrich with 20 hours of free broadcast time which, according to specialists, is worth \$150,000 to \$200,000.

House rules prohibit a member from receiving gifts that total more than \$250 from any single source in a one-year period. The Ethics in Government Act bars lawmakers from so-

liciting or accepting anything of value from a person seeking official action from Congress or from someone whose interests may be substantially affected by the lawmaker's actions.

Gingrich threatens aid cutoff to Russia

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) threatened on Feb. 21 to cut off aid to Russia if it continues to aid Iran in its nuclear program. The statement comes less than two weeks after a visit to Washington by Israeli Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu, in which one of Netanyahu's chief purposes was to "warn" the United States about the Iranian nuclear energy program.

Netanyahu met with Gingrich on Feb. 6. Echoing Netanyahu's statements, Gingrich said Iran's Islamic fundamentalism is "the largest short-term threat on the planet. . . . We need to take a grip on how dangerous Iran is, and we need to have a strategy that says this current regime cannot be allowed to get weapons of mass destruction, period, under any circumstances. . . . I don't think we can go to the Holocaust Museum . . . [and] say how sad it is and then wait until Iran takes over Tel Aviv."

Clinger calls for probe of Ron Brown

Rep. William Clinger (R-Pa.), chairman of the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight, called on Feb. 27 on Attorney General Janet Reno to appoint an independent counsel to investigate the business dealings and financial disclosures of Commerce Secretary Ron Brown. Clinger, who has been on the warpath against Brown for some time, claims

that his staff has found evidence that Brown may have broken the law by filing inaccurate financial reports, accepting outside income while serving as commerce secretary, and giving Congress misleading information about his business dealings.

The Justice Department, at Clinger's behest, began a formal inquiry into allegations against Brown at the end of February and has 90 days from that point to decide whether there are grounds for appointing an independent counsel.

Brown's attorney, Reid Weingarten, called Clinger's allegations "a partisan effort to prematurely influence Justice's investigation." Weingarten said that any inaccuracies in Brown's financial disclosure reports are not evidence of any criminal wrongdoing.

Ethics committee whitewashes Faircloth

The Senate Ethics Committee, chaired by Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), has ruled that Lauch Faircloth's (R-N.C.) investments in the pork industry (estimated at \$19 million) do not conflict with his chairmanship of the Environment and Public Works subcommittee on Clean Air, Wetlands, Private Property and Nuclear Safety. The subcommittee also has jurisdiction over waste production in the swine industry.

In March 1994, Faircloth co-sponsored a bill along with Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) requiring the secretary of agriculture to regulate and authorize the federal purchase and eradication of diseased pigs. Faircloth has major interests in at least nine hog-farming operations in North Carolina. He also owns more than \$1 million in stock in Lundy Packing Co., North Carolina's

largest independent hog-processing company, and at least \$100,000 of stock in Smithfield Foods Inc., a major American pork processor.

Congress moves to take control of District

Congress made the first moves to take more direct control over the running of the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., by creating a "control board" which is to deal with the city's shaky finances. A hearing on Feb. 22 rejected Washington Mayor Marion Barry's plea for a federal bailout of the city's finances.

Barry has agreed to a control board to oversee the city's finances and management in an effort to ward off the more radical solutions being mooted, such as the appointment of a "receiver" with the power to single-handedly slash government spending. Although Barry has introduced massive layoffs of city workers, Congress is still not satisfied.

"The District has conspicuously failed to implement the type of dramatic spending reductions and financial controls that are the only avenue left to deal with the situation," argued Thomas Davis (R-Va.), a freshman who heads the House subcommittee on District governance.

Barry argued that Congress should reimburse the city for old bills, foot more of the cost of retirees' pensions, give the city authority to tax commuters, and agree to manage and pay for the city's Medicaid programs and prisons, responsibilities which do not normally fall on city governments. Some Conservative Revolution ideologues, such as House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), intend to use the District as a guinea pig on which they can test their radical theories of government.