

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Dole announces return of **Balanced Budget Amendment**

Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.) suggested on May 3 that the Balanced Budget Amendment to the Constitution, which was narrowly defeated in the Senate last year, will be returned to the floor of the Senate. He said he hoped to start the process during the week of May 7.

Dole was optimistic that there would be 8-10 more Democratic votes than last year, and referred to one of the issues that generated opposition to the amendment. "I think there are ways to add a provision to the Balanced Budget Amendment that will ensure that Social Security surpluses can never again be used to mask deficit spending," he said.

Wellstone defends **working families**

On May 2, Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) introduced the Working Families Economic Security Act, the third major piece of legislation along the lines of proposals put forward by Sens. Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) and Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) in their high wage task force. Wellstone said that his bill is needed to ensure "that bread and butter economic issues are brought back front and center to the attention of this Congress, which so far has all but ignored them." The bill "contributes significantly to efforts within the Democratic caucus . . . on improving the paycheck security, health security, and retirement security of all Americans."

Wellstone took issue with recent economic reports coming out of the Clinton administration. "Underneath the numbers which reflect record highs in the stock market, low unemploy-

ment, and slow growth in the economy," he said, "a time bomb is ticking for American families. Many workers are in fact being left behind, with only dim hope for a brighter future. They are working more and earning less. . . . For many, especially low and moderate income working people, the economic recovery is spotty, partial, and has failed to increase their real take-home pay."

The bill includes a minimum wage increase, protection for striking workers, a streamlined job training program, and corporate accountability with regard to employee layoffs.

FDA reform said to **benefit companies**

The Health and Environment Subcommittee of the House Commerce Committee heard testimony on May 1 on proposed legislation ostensibly designed to speed up the approval process for new drugs and medical devices, and to make the functioning of the Food and Drug Administration more efficient. However, several witnesses attacked the legislation for unduly benefitting the interests of pharmaceutical companies.

The lead witness, FDA Administrator David Kessler, attacked the provision for third-party review of new drug applications. "By essentially privatizing the review of new drugs, medical devices, and food and color additives, the public will be deprived of having an independent sentinel looking out for the public's health and safety," he said. This "privatization approach weakens the standards for the approval of drugs and food and color additives."

Joe Barton (R-Tex.), one of the architects of the legislation, in an inter-

view on the CNBC cable TV program "Capital Gains" prior to the hearing, argued, "We're not privatizing the FDA. We're not taking their power away. We're taking common sense ideas that have been tested in Europe and Japan and applying them here in the United States."

Kessler rejected this argument. If a manufacturer is allowed to choose its reviewer, and "if you have a system that has multiple forums, we need to be very careful that there's not forum shopping and that we don't allow people to 'buy' their reviews," he said.

Bill to control illegal **immigration clears Senate**

After eight days of debate, the Senate, in a vote of 97-3 on May 2, passed a reform of illegal immigration laws. At one point early in the debate, the bill was yanked off the floor by Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.), in order to prevent a vote on an amendment sponsored by Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) to increase the minimum wage.

Among the amendments passed was one sponsored by Alan Simpson (R-Wyo.), to bring state-issued documents, such as birth certificates and drivers' licenses, into closer conformity with federal standards. Another, sponsored by Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), provides funds for the construction of physical barriers along the border between Mexico and San Diego County, California.

An effort by Spencer Abraham (R-Mich.), to strip from the bill provisions establishing a national worker identification system, failed. Abraham said that other provisions in the bill already address the problem of hiring illegal aliens, and that a national identifica-

tion system "is not going to do much to address that problem . . . if the employer's objective is to hire a lower-priced employee who happens to be an illegal alien, because the system will be circumvented intentionally."

Russell Feingold (D-Wisc.) blasted the sponsors of the bill for not dealing with half of the illegal alien problem, those who overstay their visas. "Instead," he said, "the bill supporters proposed a massive new national worker verification system, complete with uniform federal identification documents. So, rather than targeting the individuals who break our laws and are here illegally, the premise of the proposal was to ensure the identity of every worker in America—U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, and so on—[who] had to be verified by a government agency in Washington."

H Health bill for newborns addressed on Senate floor

Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) motivated the "Newborns' and Mothers' Health Protection Act of 1996," sponsored by Bradley, Nancy Kassebaum (R-Kan.), and Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), on the Senate floor on May 2. The bill was passed out of the Education and Labor Committee by a vote of 14-2 on April 17. It requires insurance companies to pay for hospital stays of at least 48 hours for women giving birth.

Bradley said that what prompted the bill was stories that doctors were no longer making the decisions about when women who have given birth should leave the hospital. "Instead," he said, "the decision forcing women to leave the hospital in less than 24 hours after childbirth was being made by a clerk at an insurance company shaving costs and shortening lives."

Bradley said the bill "respects the authority of doctors and other health care practitioners, in consultation with mothers, to make health-care decisions about the length of time their patient should stay in the hospital following childbirth." While the bill allows shorter stays if the doctor and the patient agree to it, "in no event can an insurance company require that she leave in less than 48 hours," or 96 hours in the case of a caesarean section.

Jay Rockefeller (D-W.V.) said that the bill will shift "the decision-making power of when a mother and her baby would be leaving a hospital, from an insurance company or an HMO . . . back to the doctor and to the patient. . . . That is where it should be, not an insurance company driven by other considerations, including those of their stockholders."

Veto sustained on State Department reorganization

The House failed, by a vote of 234-188 on April 30, to override President Clinton's veto of the State Department reorganization bill. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.) called the bill "flawed," and said that "it would undermine the foreign policy powers of the Presidency and force the adoption of policies that would harm U.S. national interests." He said that the reorganization mandated by the bill "has no connection to the real problems of foreign policy," and charged that the proponents of eliminating one of the foreign affairs agencies "have never demonstrated the need for this reorganization."

Bill Richardson (D-N.M.) said that the bill "micro-manages foreign policy. It basically tells the President that he has to eliminate agencies to

conduct foreign policy."

International Relations Committee Chairman Ben Gilman (R-N.Y.) said the bill "delivered on the President's pledge to reduce the size of government," and that he was "stunned" by Clinton's assessment that the bill was "unacceptably restrictive."

Oil firm profits targeted by Pryor

On May 3, seven Republicans took to the Senate floor to complain about the burden of the Clinton-supported 1993 tax increases, including the 4.3¢ per gallon increase in the gas tax. The only mention of the recent runup in gasoline prices at the pump was by Frank Murkowski (R-Alaska), who attributed it to "market forces," although he conceded that the tax had little to do with the price hikes.

David Pryor (D-Ark.) attacked the oil companies for their reported skyrocketing first-quarter profits, and said that "that is where some relief can be given because that is where the price is determined, not with the 4.3¢-a-gallon deficit reduction tax." Pryor, who had just participated in a Finance Committee hearing on repealing the 4.3¢ gas tax, characterized that hearing as "very, very partisan." It "sounded like a political convention," he said.

Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) pointed out that most Republicans had supported the increases in gas taxes in the 1980s and early 1990s, including "our distinguished majority leader," who "was one of those who supported the increase in gasoline taxes of 10¢."

However, Democrats have so far failed to point out that Republicans are covering for the oil multinationals' economic warfare against the United States.