

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Senate okays Chemical Weapons Convention

The Senate approved the Chemical Weapons Convention by a vote of 74-26 on April 24, after the Clinton administration made concessions that were accepted by Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.). During the debate, Lott said that the conditions answered many of the concerns of Republicans and made the treaty a better document than it would have been otherwise.

Lott was seen as the key needed to overcome the opposition of conservative Republicans led by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms (R-N.C.). Lott's support for the treaty was not certain until he took to the floor during the second day of the debate, to make his announcement. During his remarks, he reported that the treaty was not taken up during 1996 at the request of then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher. "Had we not cancelled the vote," he said, "I would have voted against it and I believe it would have failed."

Lott said he decided to vote for the convention because "I believe there will be real and lasting consequences to the United States if we do not ratify the convention. In a very real sense, the credibility of commitments made by two Presidents of our country, one Republican and one Democrat, is at stake."

Among the conditions accepted by the Senate were ones requiring search warrants for all involuntary searches of U.S. facilities; allowing use by the U.S. military of non-lethal agents such as tear gas, to rescue downed pilots; restricting the sharing of U.S. intelligence information with the international control organization to be established by the treaty; and, a condition precluding the United States from financing the destruction of Russia's chemical weapons arsenal.

However, not all the conditions were accepted by the Senate. Five were voted down on amendments sponsored by Joseph Biden (D-Del.). These related to Presidential certification requirements, Russian elimination of chemical weapons, and the barring of inspectors of certain countries from U.S. facilities.

Permanent continuing resolution mooted

House and Senate Republicans are taking advantage of the flood disaster in the Northern Plains states to protect themselves from being hurt again politically by another government shutdown. In an emergency supplemental appropriations bill which contains approximately \$500 million in disaster assistance for flood-stricken areas in Minnesota and the Dakotas, as well as additional funding for U.S. operations in Bosnia, Republicans are hoping to attach a permanent continuing resolution that would take effect any time the fiscal year expires without the appropriations process being completed, as happened at the end of 1995.

On April 23, Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) urged haste on action on the disaster relief. He said, "The Federal government's role here is very clear. It's to try to provide direct, meaningful, practical, flexible assistance in the most reasonable timeframe that we can. We have to act with haste in order to be helpful to the extent that it is necessary."

Rep. Earl Pomeroy (D-N.D.), after a meeting with President Clinton and other administration officials later that day, said that Clinton's budget request for flood aid was "desperately needed and very welcome to the people of our region."

The House Appropriations Com-

mittee reported out the bill on April 24, but in the Senate, John Ashcroft (R-Mo.) and Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Tex.) are cosponsoring an amendment to add the permanent continuing resolution to the bill. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) expressed confidence that the amendment would be accepted by the House when the bill goes to conference committee.

Another possible issue will be off-sets in other areas of the budget to pay for the disaster relief. Daschle said on April 24, "I think that will be an issue all the way through the process."

NATO expansion speedup pushed by House GOPers

On April 24, a group of House Republicans, led by International Relations Committee Chairman Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), introduced a bill intended to facilitate even more rapid expansion of NATO than is now proposed. At a press conference, Gilman said, "It's designed to carry forward the work we began two years ago in the Contract with America, NATO enlargement and ballistic missile defense. Secondly, it's intended to show that contrary to conventional wisdom, both of these important objectives can be achieved without disrupting relations with Russia." The bill includes a sense of the Congress resolution that Romania, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania "should be invited to join NATO as soon as they satisfy all of the relevant criteria," Gilman said.

The sponsors of the bill are calling for what Curt Weldon (R-Pa.) called a "new approach to Russia." This approach would shift the focus of the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty away from the United States and Russia, toward so-called "rogue" nations such as North Korea and China. Weldon

added that approval of the Conventional Forces in Europe flank agreement (intended to regulate conventional military forces deployed in southeastern Europe), would "signal our strong determination to proceed [with NATO expansion] in a way which is sensitive to Russian interests."

Gerald Solomon (R-N.Y.) made it clear, however, that larger strategic questions were not to be considered in deciding whether new members should be allowed into NATO. In response to a question on political issues, Solomon snarled, "There can be no vetoes [by members such as Germany or Turkey]." He threatened that if Germany or any other country tried to exercise a veto against any new members, "I personally would lead the fight to pull us out of NATO, period." Solomon claimed that NATO cannot continue in the status quo, because "somewhere down the line we would again fight another world war, or at least, another Cold War."

Infrastructure projects on Democratic agenda

Remarks by two key Democrats accompanying introduction of legislation regarding funding of the Federal highway trust fund, suggest that infrastructure may become a key issue in the 105th Congress.

On April 22, Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.V.) introduced a bill to transfer the 4.3¢ increase in the gas tax that was passed as part of a deficit reduction budget package, to the highway trust fund. The following day, Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) introduced a similar bill that would put 3.8¢ into the highway trust fund and one-half cent into a new account to be used for Amtrak.

In his remarks, Byrd pointed to, not only the overall decline of U.S. transportation infrastructure, but also the shrinking Federal role in building and maintaining that infrastructure. "Few economists would disagree that adequate long-term investment in infrastructure is critical to a nation's economic well being," he said. However, "our nation's investment as a percentage of our gross domestic product in infrastructure has been almost cut in half since 1980."

Byrd pointed out that the Department of Transportation rates 61% of the nation's highways as in fair or poor condition, and 25% of bridges as structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. And, he said, "we would have to increase our national highway investment by more than \$15 billion a year just to avoid further deterioration of our national highway system." Baucus, in his remarks, focussed on the necessity for maintaining Amtrak rail service.

While most Republican legislative proposals regarding infrastructure are a variation of free market privatization, at least two senators have involved themselves in more sane proposals. John Warner (R-Va.) is a co-sponsor of Baucus's bill, and John Chafee (R-R.I.), in March, introduced a major bill to revise and expand the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), which is up for re-authorization this year.

Restore benefits to legal immigrants

A bipartisan group of senators introduced a bill on April 17 to restore benefits to legal immigrants that were cut by the 1996 welfare reform bill. The bill would restore Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Food Stamp

benefits to elderly and disabled legal immigrants, as well as to refugees (who often have no sponsors) who were receiving such benefits prior to Aug. 22, 1996, the day President Clinton signed the bill into law.

John Chafee (R-R.I.) called the approach "a matter of fundamental fairness." Al D'Amato (R-N.Y.), a co-sponsor of the bill, said, "This bill is about making sure that some of the most vulnerable people, the elderly and the disabled, are not pushed out of the SSI and Food Stamp programs." He added, "This is not a welfare bill. It is a bill of fundamental fairness and compassion. These people came to the United States and have been living under our laws for years. It is unfair to change the rules on them suddenly."

Budget talks continue, but assessments vary

Budget negotiations between President Clinton and the Congressional leadership continued in late April, but with each side giving different assessments as to the possibility of an agreement.

On April 21, Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) said, "I am hopeful that we can make progress, but I have to say it is imperative that Republicans get off this extraordinarily impractical and insupportable demand for tax breaks; \$200 billion is just not going to cut it."

A couple of days later, Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) said that now is the time to move forward. "In every negotiation and every contract agreement there comes a time when you have to enter the final agreement and move forward. I think that time is now. I think the longer we wait, the more difficult it is going to be to get an agreement."