

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Budget, tax bills pass Congress in record time

The House and Senate moved very quickly on July 30 and 31 to pass the conference reports on the budget and tax reconciliation bills, after an agreement between Congressional Republicans and the Clinton administration was announced on July 29. Republicans, especially, were eager to get both bills passed in time for the beginning of the summer recess on Aug. 1.

The Senate voted on both bills on July 31, passing the budget bill by a vote of 85-15 and the tax bill by a vote of 92-8. Only Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) and Ernest Hollings (D-S.C.) voted against both bills.

The debate on the bills was characterized by each side trying to take more credit than the other for the bipartisan agreement and the supposed economic boom since 1993. John Kerry (D-Mass.) went so far as to claim credit for the doubling of the stock market since 1993, as a sign of the success of "the application of Democratic ideals to fiscal policy."

On the House side, the budget bill was voted up 346-85 on July 30, and the tax bill by a vote of 389-43. The weak opposition to both bills was led by Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.), who is well known to be harboring Presidential ambitions for the year 2000, in opposition to Vice President Al Gore.

Even Democrats who supported the bills, however, complained about the speed with which they were brought onto the floor for the vote. The conference report on the budget bill was distributed to members at about 3:30 a.m. on July 30, and the vote on passage took place at 4:30 that afternoon. Joe Moakley (D-Mass.), the ranking minority member on the Rules Committee, pleaded with Republicans

to allow a few hours so members would have time to read the bill, but the "martial law rule" which set the parameters for the floor debate was passed on a party line vote of 226-197. Even John Spratt (D-S.C.), who led the Democrats in the negotiations, said that the bill was "being brought to the floor with unseemly haste for something so serious and so far-reaching."

Biden says, we must feed North Korea

In a speech on the Senate floor on July 31, Joseph Biden (D-Del.) acknowledged the disaster unfolding in North Korea. "It is in our interest to respond generously to their plight," Biden said. He described the evidence of the disaster from reports of the World Food Program, and entered into the *Congressional Record* an article from the July 28 *Newsweek* which graphically described the effects of the famine.

Biden said, "The United States has a long tradition of responding generously to people in need," but to date, "our response has been cautious and inadequate." As a result, he said, "the world, following our restrained lead, has been slow to meet the genuine emergency needs of the North Korean people." Biden paid obeisance to the British line that the famine resulted from "wrong-headed, discredited Communist economic policies and the devotion of vast resources to the North Korean Armed Forces." However, Biden said, "this does not make the North Korean people less deserving of emergency relief. It is not ethically permissible to use starvation as a weapon to force the North Korean dictatorship to undertake essential economic reforms."

Biden warned that geopolitical policies to "starve them out," would result in "panic, massive population migrations, and instability," which must be avoided. He concluded that providing famine relief would be the "smart thing to do . . . the noble thing to do," and "an expression of all that is best about America, that cannot help but resonate in the hearts of the North Korean people."

House Democrats blast Sanchez investigation

On July 25 and again on July 28, House Democrats attacked ongoing Republican efforts to unseat Loretta Sanchez (D), during debate on the Legislative Branch Appropriations bill. Sanchez defeated nine-term Republican Bob Dornan by 984 votes in a hotly contested race in California's 46th Congressional District, made up mostly of Orange County.

Dornan challenged the result, charging that noncitizens illegally voted in the election. He has been causing an uproar ever since with an investigation which has been supported by the House Oversight Committee, chaired by Bill Thomas (R-Calif.).

Democrats are charging that Dornan is harassing Sanchez, and that she is being targeted because she is Hispanic. They're also charging that Hispanic voters are being intimidated by Dornan's investigatory tactics. The Hispanic Caucus, headed by Xavier Becerra (D-Calif.) and Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), are leading the charge against the Republicans on this issue.

The Republicans came under attack for two other probes as well—the investigation by the Government

Reform and Oversight Committee, chaired by Dan Burton (R-Ind.), into fundraising in the 1996 Presidential campaign, and an investigation of the political activities of labor unions, which is to be paid for out of the "contingency fund" that was created earlier this year in the committee funding resolution.

Meanwhile, on the Senate side, the Rules Committee voted on July 31 to continue the investigation of the 1996 Louisiana Senate race without the participation of the Democrats, who pulled out of the investigation on June 24, charging that the investigation had yet to produce any credible evidence of fraud after six months.

Moynihán: Maglev is in the 'national interest'

On July 31, Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) introduced a bill to make Federal funding available to public-private partnerships set up to build demonstration projects for magnetic levitation rail technology. Moynihan called maglev "the first new transportation technology envisioned since the development of aviation in the early 1900s, and its adoption represents an opportunity for dramatic national gains in transportation efficiency and economic growth."

Moynihan described maglev technology, and pointed out how Germany and Japan are well advanced in developing and testing maglev systems. "Meanwhile," he said, "our Federal government has done relatively little to develop this extraordinary technology. Because Maglev is a proven technology that offers significant benefits for both passengers and freight, it is in the national interest

to demonstrate these benefits by proceeding to construct and put into service, at an early date, a project in the United States."

Moynihan's bill authorizes a total of \$930 million over six years to be spent on building maglev projects, but specifies that the U.S. contribution to any one project will not exceed two-thirds of the total cost of the project. It also mandates that the project be run by the private sector, once it is completed.

While the bill limits the degree to which the Federal government can lead in developing maglev technology, it would for the first time set a national policy which would "establish a maglev transportation technology system operating along Federal-aid highway and other rights-of-way as part of a national transportation system of the United States."

Jerusalem bombing gets kneejerk response

The Congress responded within hours to the July 30 terror bombing of a marketplace in Jerusalem. In actions that placed sole responsibility for the attack on the Palestinian Authority, both the House and the Senate passed resolutions expressing strong support for the government of Israel and calling on Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat "to do more to combat terrorism." The House also added an amendment to the Foreign Operations Appropriations bill that would cut off U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority after 90 days, barring a report from the President that the Palestinian Authority has met certain criteria regarding security cooperation with Israel.

The sponsors of the resolutions

were Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and House International Relations Committee Chairman Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), both of whom claimed that the Palestinian Authority has not done enough to combat terrorism. Among others speaking in support of the Gilman resolution were Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) and House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), who said that Arafat and the Palestinian Authority have "an absolute obligation as a function of [their] existence to join in the fight against terrorism, and the United States government should insist unequivocally that we will hold the Palestinian Authority responsible for any failure to lock up terrorists and to abide by its half of the [peace] agreement."

The amendment to the Foreign Operations bill, sponsored by Rep. Jim Saxton (R-N.J.), ties resumption of aid to conditions including: "The PLO must cease all anti-Israel rhetoric"; there must be a report which certifies all efforts taken by the Palestinian Authority to arrest, prosecute, or extradite Palestinian killers of American citizens, and which certifies that a Palestinian court system respectful of human rights has been established and due process upheld.

However, the future of Saxton's amendment is in doubt, because it is not part of the Senate version of the Foreign Operations bill, which was passed some weeks earlier.

Coincident with all this activity, is the Aug. 12 expiration of the Middle East Peace Facilitation Act, passed in 1993 after the Oslo Accords were signed, which provides aid to and legalizes U.S. relations with the PLO. The Congress failed to extend the act before departing for its summer recess on Aug. 1.