

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Is another government shutdown on the way?

The House and Senate both continued racing through the appropriations bills in an effort to finish as many as possible before the summer recess. However, major disagreements between the two Houses, as well as veto threats from President Clinton, cloud prospects that all 13 bills will be finished by Sept. 30, the end of fiscal year 1998, raising the possibility of another government shutdown.

The Senate finished work on the Defense Appropriations bill on July 30, making it the eighth of 13 spending bills that it has finished. In the process, an amendment sponsored by Spencer Abraham (R-Mich.) and Tim Hutchinson (R-Ark.) was added to the bill to increase human rights monitoring in China. A second amendment offered by Hutchinson, to condemn Chinese officials allegedly involved in forced abortions and sterilizations, was watered down to make it generic rather than specific to China. The Senate rejected an amendment by Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Tex.), which would have mandated that U.S. troop levels in Bosnia be reduced to 5,000 from the current 9,700 by Oct. 1, 1999.

The Senate was unable to complete action on the Treasury, Postal Service Appropriations bill, because of a dispute over an amendment sponsored by Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) to define the terms of service of two key staffers of the Federal Election Commission. An attempt by Democrats to table the amendment failed by a vote of 54-45, but Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.), with the concurrence of Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), pulled the bill from the floor with the expectation that the Senate would take it up again in September.

The House, in rapid action on July 30, passed the Veterans Administration-Housing and Urban Devel-

opment, the Energy and Water Development, and the Transportation Appropriations bills. Also passed, was the conference report on the Military Construction bill, which now only requires Senate passage before it is ready for President Clinton's signature. The House also finished work on the Commerce, Justice, State Department, and the Judiciary bill on Aug. 5 and the District of Columbia bill on Aug. 6.

The White House has issued veto threats against seven bills on issues ranging from how to conduct the census, to a provision in the Defense bill that would bar the use of funds for offensive military operations without express consent from Congress, to abortion-related provisions in a couple of bills. While some of these provisions may be stripped in conference, others will not, leading to a possible showdown in October, as much between factions within the GOP as between the GOP and President Clinton. One GOP faction, led by David McIntosh (R-Ind.), believes it can beat Clinton in a showdown, while others, such as Appropriations Committee Chairman Bob Livingston (R-La.), are trying to avoid a government shutdown.

House farm relief act falls far short

On Aug. 3, faced with a severe crisis in the farm sector, the House passed a bill initiated in the Senate to make available to farmers their 1999 Agricultural Market Transition Act (AMTA, part of the 1996 farm bill) payment in one lump sum, in October 1998, instead of two semi-annual payments, if they choose to do so. The action will provide little real relief to farmers.

House Agriculture Committee Chairman Bob Smith (R-Ore.) said the bill will make \$5.5 billion available to farmers "as much as one year early to help them cope with the cash shortage that they now are experiencing due to low prices." Smith said this was only one of a number of actions the Congress has taken and will take to address the cash flow crisis in the farm sector. He promised that the House would act, soon, on both the International Monetary Fund funding and fast-track trade negotiating authority, both of which, it is incorrectly claimed, would improve export markets for agricultural products.

However, the limitations of the bill were readily apparent to both sides. David Minge (D-Minn.) said, "This legislation provides no assistance to producers facing hardship because of low prices." Indeed, it is not even new money for disaster relief, but rather funds that were already authorized as part of the 1996 neo-conservative farm bill. "Advancing AMTA payments," he said, "raises a question of why we are attempting to alleviate such severe conditions with a proposal which some have characterized as putting a Band-Aid on a bullet wound. . . . We are going to have to provide real relief to our producers within the confines of the budget as soon as possible."

No Senate agreement reached on HMO reform

On July 31, the Senate adjourned for its summer recess without taking up the Patients Bill of Rights legislation, despite Majority Leader Trent Lott's (R-Miss.) stated desire to do so before the Senate left town. Lott told reporters on July 29 that he had been offering Democrats, since June 18, to take up the Democrats' bill, and then the GOP

bill, with three amendments allowed on each side. He said, "If we don't get that agreement this week, we're not going to agree to any kind of arrangement which doesn't get us to some conclusion, . . . not 40 or 20 amendments, like they're proposing." He accused Democrats of deliberately delaying, because "they know their bill has lost momentum and that we have a very good package."

Later that day, Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) said, "What are they [the GOP] afraid of? Why not have a good debate?" He pointed out that during the prior week, the Republicans had allowed 65 amendments on one appropriations bill and 30 on another. So, he said, he couldn't accept claims that there is not enough time to allow 20 amendments on the Patients Bill of Rights bills.

A couple of days later, Daschle appeared with Vice President Al Gore and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) to announce that the entire Senate Democratic Caucus had signed a letter urging Lott "to make the Patients Bill of Rights the first order of business when the Senate returns in September." Daschle vowed, "One way or another, the easy way or the hard way, we will have a real debate on patients' protection."

GOP, White House heading for clash on census

The House passed the Commerce, Justice, State Department, and the Judiciary appropriations bill on Aug. 6, which included funding for the Census Bureau only through March 31, 1999 because of a dispute between the GOP and the White House over administration plans to use sampling in the 2000 census. A fierce debate on an amendment sponsored by Alan Mollohan (D-

W.V.), to restore full funding, revealed how far apart the two sides are on the issue.

Mollohan defended the Census Bureau's plans to use "scientific statistical sampling," recommended by the National Academy of Sciences, on the basis that "it would guarantee that 4 million people who were not counted in the 1990 census [most of whom were urban and rural poor] would be counted in the 2000 census." He said that the GOP opposes this plan because "of their belief that including these undercounted groups will somehow disadvantage Republican majority control" of the House.

Opponents accused Democrats and President Clinton of pursuing a government shutdown strategy over the issue. Harold Rogers (R-Ky.), chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, State Department, and the Judiciary, explained that the funding provision merely implements an agreement reached with the White House last year. He said that the agreement was, in essence, "Let us have a cooling-off period, let us proceed with plans for both methods, let us let the courts rule as they may, with a D-Day of next spring to make the final decision, when hopefully all three of those conditions would have matured."

The Mollohan amendment was defeated, and President Clinton later said in a statement that the House "is undermining the Census Bureau's ability to plan and conduct an accurate decennial census."

Capitol Hill shooting prompts security review

Members of the House and Senate wasted no time, in the aftermath of the July 24 shooting in which two Capitol Police officers were killed and a visitor

wounded, in reassuring citizens that the Capitol would remain open to the public, as it has always been. However, the shooting incident has prompted reconsideration of a 1995 proposal for an underground visitors center at the East Front, where visitors could also be screened before they enter the Capitol itself.

Four days after the shooting, the Senate approved an amendment to the Treasury, Postal Service Appropriations bill, to transfer \$14.1 million from the construction of a new Transportation Department headquarters building, into additional security for the Capitol. Senate Rules and Administration Committee Chairman John Warner (R-Va.) explained to the Senate that his committee had already approved a plan put forward by the Capitol Police about a year ago, to enhance perimeter security. Earlier this year, \$20 million was appropriated to begin to implement this plan.

On July 29, Warner and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) met with House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and House Oversight Committee Chairman Bill Thomas (R-Calif.). Warner told reporters afterwards that he and Thomas were tasked "to begin to assess the interests of our members, to explain what is to be done, and to promptly bring back to our respective leaders a joint program and a proposed piece of legislation as to how to move forward on the visitors center."

The major unresolved issue is how to pay for the visitors center. The original plan, codified in a bill introduced by Warner last November, called for spending as little public money as possible. But, after the shooting, members of both parties have endorsed a plan to split the \$125 million cost 50-50 between public and private funds.