

Congressional Closeup by Carl J. Osgood

Wellstone takes on welfare 'reform'

Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.), often a maverick in the Senate on social issues, lost an attempt requiring the Secretary of Health and Human Services to issue a report on what happens to families after they leave welfare. His move came on an amendment he offered to the defense authorization bill on May 25, which was defeated by a vote of 49-50.

In his remarks, Wellstone took issue with those who boast that welfare reform has been a success, because 1.3 million families have left the welfare rolls since August 1996. Seeing the welfare rolls reduced "does not mean necessarily that we have reduced poverty in this country. It doesn't mean these families have moved from welfare to self-sufficiency," he said. The drop in caseload "doesn't tell us what is really happening," whether families are better off now or have fallen further into poverty, or whether their children have access to adequate health care. "No one seems to know what has happened to these families," he said. "I call them 'The Disappeared.'"

He cited numerous charity organizations' reports that former welfare families are, on average, worse off now, and that these families are also having more difficulty gaining benefits that they are still entitled to, such as food stamps. "The data show," he said, "that people who stopped getting welfare are less likely to get food stamps, less likely to get Medicaid, more likely to go without food for a day or more, more likely to move because they couldn't pay rent . . . more likely to say 'my life is worse' compared to six months ago."

Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) was the only other Senator to speak to Wellstone's amendment. "We do not know enough," about how former wel-

fare recipients "have fared, and states should be required to collect this information," he said. No Republicans took to the floor, perhaps reflecting Wellstone's comment that "we don't know what we don't want to know," though four did cross the aisle to support it.

GOP in disarray as House adjourns

The House adjourned abruptly on May 27, after the GOP leadership yanked a resolution establishing the rules for debate on the fiscal year 2000 defense authorization bill. The resolution included two provisions with the effect of angering not only Democrats, but also enough Republicans that the leadership decided to withdraw the bill rather than risk seeing it defeated in a roll call vote.

Many conservative Republicans were angered because the resolution actually amended the underlying bill, removing a provision prohibiting the expenditure of funds for U.S. military operations in Kosovo, which had caused the White House to threaten a veto. Ron Paul (R-Tex.) argued that the rule "strictly limits a serious debate with regards to our national defense and our involvement in war." He added that the decision of the International War Crimes Tribunal to indict Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic "indicates to most of the world that there is no attempt whatsoever on the part of NATO to attempt any sort of peace negotiations. This is a guarantee of the perpetuation of war."

The resolution also blocked some amendments by Democrats, including one by Norman Dicks (D-Wash.), dealing with security at Department of Energy nuclear weapons plants, and another by John Dingell (D-Mich.)

that would have stricken GOP language transferring control of those DOE plants to the Department of Defense.

When the process fell apart, the GOP leadership blamed the White House for failing to deliver 50 promised votes in return for striking the Kosovo spending prohibition. This caused Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.) to reply that the GOP was blaming Democrats "for not fixing the problems they themselves created" when they decided to block the Democratic amendments.

And, as if the GOP did not already have enough problems, six Republicans signed a Democratic discharge petition on campaign finance reform during the week. That brings the total number of signatures to 202 of the 218 required.

House passes 'Social Security lock box'

On May 26, the House GOP succeeded in passing its "Social Security lock box" plan. The bill prohibits the Congress from passing any budget resolution that would "increase the on-budget deficit for any fiscal year," except with a majority vote. The vote was 416-12.

The near unanimity, however, belied Democratic dissatisfaction, which was revealed in the debate on the rule. This was indicated by Joe Moakley (D-Mass.), the ranking Democrat on the Rules Committee. He told the House that "although this bill will probably not make things any worse, it also will not make things any better." The rule allowed the Democrats to offer one motion to recommit the bill back to the House Ways and Means Committee, but did not allow any

amendments, and it was passed by a largely party line vote of 223-205.

The Democratic motion required the addition of an amendment to prohibit the Congress from considering any budget resolution that would use any portion of the budget surplus, as reported by the Congressional Budget Office, "until there is both a Social Security solvency certification and a Medicare solvency certification." Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) argued that the GOP bill puts the budget surpluses into a lock box and "gives the key to the majority," when what is needed is a bipartisan commitment to reforming both Social Security and Medicare, in order to keep both programs solvent for the foreseeable future. However, the Democratic motion failed, also by a largely party line vote, of 222-205.

One day later, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) told reporters that the Senate would soon take up a bill that uses the House bill as a starting point, but includes a provision lowering the debt ceiling and, therefore, would also "tie the hands" of the President.

Hyde, McCollum push GOP youth crime bill

On May 25, House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) and Crime Subcommittee chairman Bill McCollum (R-Fla.) described for reporters the process by which they planned to bring a juvenile justice bill to the House floor immediately following the Memorial Day recess. Hyde began by announcing that he was "supportive" of the measures passed by the Senate in a torturous debate the week before. However, "we must exercise some care," he said, "in avoiding unseen consequences," such as re-

voking the right to gun ownership of anyone convicted of a gun crime as a juvenile, without requiring states to make available juvenile delinquency records.

The bulk of the Hyde-McCollum provisions increase the power and the authority of the Justice Department in prosecuting juvenile crimes. McCollum complained that "we have a broken juvenile justice system where, if a youngster vandalizes, slashes tires, rips a car off . . . frequently, they are not getting punished." The proposal includes a grant program to states to expand their juvenile justice programs, providing "they assure the [U.S. Attorney General] that there are going to be consequences" for juveniles committing crimes. Seven of the remaining eight provisions include increased penalties for committing gun crimes on school property, increased enforcement of existing gun laws, instant background checks at gun shows, mandating the provision of gun safety devices, and so on. The last provision, which McCollum could not provide specifics on, will deal with violence in video games, movies, and TV.

A couple of days later, House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.) suggested that the House ought to pass the Senate-passed bill, adding that "there ought to be a follow-on bill or bills that begin to address" issues concerning the media and the internet.

Agriculture funding bill gridlocked

On the second day of debate, the House gridlocked on the Department of Agriculture appropriations bill. The bill provides \$13.99 billion in discretionary spending levels, about \$531 million below the President's request, and \$47 billion in mandatory spend-

ing, about \$890 million below the administration's request. Agriculture appropriations subcommittee chairman Joe Skeen (R-N.M.) complained that the administration is proposing to pay for requested increases with user fees that require legislation. "Once again the administration has favored budget gimmicks over reality because the main component of this legislation [user fees] has been strongly opposed by consumer groups, industry, and the authorizing committee for several years," he said.

While the Republicans favored partisan attacks on the Clinton administration, the ranking Democrat on Skeen's subcommittee, Rep. Marcy Kaptur (Ohio), let a little bit of reality shine into the debate. She reminded the House that "food is not produced at the local grocery store." Kaptur called the bill "an exceedingly limited response to an extremely serious situation afflicting . . . the farm economy across our nation." She reported that "people are borrowing against their accumulated equity to make up for their lack of ability to receive a price for their product in the market." Kaptur lamented the fact that the bill has no provisions for any emergency assistance to farmers.

The bill became the victim of "filibuster by amendment," however. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) brought about a half-dozen amendments to the floor reducing funding levels for specific individual programs. At one point, during debate on an amendment to reduce funding for peanut research by \$300,000, Jack Kingston (R-Ga.) complained that Coburn's real purpose was not to debate the merits of the programs he was attacking but simply to "cut spending." The GOP leadership ended up yanking the bill in order to deal with these internal disputes behind closed doors.