Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

House Votes To Loosen Cuba Trade Sanctions

Supporters of efforts to repeal the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba gained ground on July 20, when the House, in separate votes, acted to allow the sales of food and medicine, and to weaken travel restrictions. The vehicle this time, was the Treasury, Postal Service and General Government appropriations bill, and the language was changed to conform more to the budget language of the appropriations bill. Instead of specific language authorizing selective lifting of the sanctions, as was attempted with the Agriculture appropriations bill, this time, the language used prohibits the spending of funds for the enforcement of specific provisions of the sanctions with regard to Cuba. As Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) repeatedly pointed out, the law, as it stands, is not changed by the amendments.

The first amendment, sponsored by Jerry Moran (R-Kan.), prohibits the enforcement of sanctions on agricultural products and medicines. The second, sponsored by Mark Sanford (R-S.C.), prohibits the enforcement of restrictions on travel to Cuba by Americans. Charles Stenholm (D-Tex.) argued that the nearly 40-year unilateral embargo has not worked and is only hurting U.S. producers, because the rest of the world is selling to Cuba. Sanford admitted that the Helms-Burton law, which imposes secondary boycotts against foreign companies doing business in Cuba, has not worked. Instead, he argued that supporters of normal trade relations with China ought to take the same approach toward Cuba, since Cuba is no longer regarded as a military threat to the United States.

Opponents, led by Menendez, Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-Fla.), and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), argued that the amendments would make law enforcement impossible with respect to the sanctions, and that easing the restrictions would aid Cuban President Fidel Castro's regime. However, the vote on Moran's amendment was 301-116, and on Sanford's amendment, 232-186.

Agriculture Spending Bill Passes Senate

On July 20, the Senate completed action on its version of the Fiscal Year 2001 Department of Agriculture appropriations bill, passing the bill by a vote of 79-13 after three days of work on it. The bill includes $2 billion in emergency assistance for agricultural producers, about $900 million of which was added in while the bill was on the Senate floor.

The additional emergency assistance, for recovery from natural disasters and low commodity prices, did not come without complaint, however. Banking Committee Chairman Phil Gramm (R-Tex.), after agreeing to a motion to prohibit the consideration of further emergency funding beyond what was already approved in the bill, admitted that there were legitimate emergencies, but that the $16.6 billion provided for agricultural emergencies over the last two years "strengthens the ability of those who want to draw the line and say that enough is enough." Budget Committee Chairman Pete Domenici (R-N.M.) added that, at some point, adding emergency funding to the bill "has to kind of end." Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) replied, "The reason we have had to have substantial emergency spending is because of the failure of the last farm bill." Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) said, that when "people are flat on their backs from causes they could not control," the Federal government ought to step in and help.

Republicans have responded to the farm crisis with the "Rural American Prosperity Act," a bill introduced on July 19 by Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) and a gaggle of House Republicans. Instead of admitting that the 1996 "Freedom to Farm" bill has failed, the GOP takes the approach that what farmers need, instead of stable parity commodity prices, is tax cuts, regulatory relief, and "risk management tools." Lugar declared that these measures will increase the farmer's return on capital and therefore "make very possible the continuation of family farms in America."

Partisan Wrangling over Tax Cuts Continues

On July 21, the Senate, on a vote of 60-39, sent to the White House a bill to cut the so-called marriage penalty tax. President Clinton had denounced the bill on July 18 as "part of an irresponsible, poorly targeted, and regressive tax plan." Clinton added, that if the GOP succeeds, "more benefits will go to the top 1% of taxpayers than to the bottom 80% of all Americans." However, he offered to sign the bill if Congress passes the President's Medicare prescription drug benefit plan. The GOP's response to Clinton's offer, was to call it fiscally irresponsible.

Underlying this back and forth is a battle over what to do with the budget surplus being projected by the Congressional Budget Office. The latest projections put the surplus at $4.2 trillion over the next ten years. The Republicans have responded by passing tax cut after tax cut, while the Democrats are calling for that money to be used for prescription drug benefits, school construction, and other programs. Presidential politics is also a factor, because the Republicans are reportedly hoping that the President will veto their tax cuts before the national party conventions.