

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Budget To Be Fought Out in Lame Duck Session

The House GOP leadership called it quits on Nov. 3, one day after the Senate, and left town for the waning days of the election campaign, but not before passing the 15th Continuing Resolution to keep the government going until Nov. 14, when Congress will return for a lame duck session. The aim of the session will be to wrap up what has been the most difficult appropriations process in recent memory.

The move to a lame duck session came in the aftermath of the collapse of a deal on the bill to fund the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Departments on Oct. 31. "Maybe we need to take a little time out here and go complete the election and then come back," said Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.). House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) had wanted to keep the House in session, but relented once the Senate decided to go.

Six of the 13 annual spending bills remain to be completed. Issues that remain outstanding include funding for education, proposed ergonomics rules, and amnesty for certain illegal immigrants resident in the United States.

Senate Democrats Block Bankruptcy Reform Bill

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) was unable to find 60 votes to keep the bankruptcy reform bill alive on Nov. 1, in part because 16 Senators had already left town to do some campaigning before the Nov. 7 election. The cloture vote was 53-30, following two days of debate.

Opposition to the cloture motion was led by Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.), who has been the most persistent voice

in the Senate against the bill, even after the original version of the bill passed the Senate by a vote of 83-14 earlier this year. The day before the vote, Wellstone called the bill an "anti-consumer, give-away-to-big-business bill," produced by a Congress "which has been dominated by special interest legislation." He said that several amendments that had been approved on the Senate floor were taken out of the conference report, resulting in a bill that was worse than the original.

Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), who, along with Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.), was a chief architect of the bill, retailed the same arguments that have been used by the proponents of bankruptcy reform all along. He said that reform is necessary because too many people are using the bankruptcy system to get out of debts that they could otherwise pay. Supporters of the bill continue to refuse to recognize evidence that most Chapter 7 bankruptcy filings are the result of genuine economic distress, such as that resulting from the loss of a job or catastrophic medical difficulties.

Lott promised that there would be another vote during the lame duck session. "We will persist in our effort to pass this important legislation," he told reporters. However, Wellstone remains optimistic that the bill will go down to defeat. "I think the dynamic changes in a lame duck session," he said, "and I think we will only be in a stronger position."

Clinton Vetoes Intelligence Authorization Bill

On Nov. 4, President Clinton vetoed the fiscal year 2001 Intelligence Authorization bill, because it included a provision that would have stiffened

penalties for the unauthorized release of classified information. Clinton said that the provision is "badly flawed, . . . is overbroad and may unnecessarily chill legitimate activities that are at the heart of a democracy."

In his veto message, Clinton didn't disagree that there is a serious problem with leaks of classified material from within the government. Rather, he disagreed with how to solve the problem. He said that the provision doesn't strike the "proper balance" between protecting vital information and protecting the rights of citizens to receive the information that they need to make democracy work. He warned, "There is a serious risk that this legislation would tend to have a chilling effect on those who engage in legitimate activities." He also warned that the provision "may unduly restrain the ability of former government officials to teach, write, or engage in any activity aimed at building public understanding of complex issues." He called on the Congress to return the bill to him without that provision.

Clinton had received conflicting advice on the bill. Attorney General Janet Reno and CIA director George Tenet both supported the provision, but National Security Adviser Sandy Berger and White House Chief of Staff John Podesta recommended vetoing the bill. The four largest U.S. news organizations had also sent a letter to the White House opposing the provision.

Some Senate Democrats also supported vetoing the bill. Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) told reporters on Nov. 1 that the bill "attempts to protect our national security in such broad and vague terms and without regard for the potential of rampant over-classification of government information, that it will have profound effects on the ability of an informed citizenry to keep our government honest."