

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Republicans, Democrats Set Forth Their Agendas

Jan. 22 marked the first full day of Senate business in the 107th Congress. It is likely that the Senate will concentrate on clearing nominations for at least a week or two, and both parties took this as an opportunity to lay out their agendas for the coming year.

While Democrats introducing a raft of bills, the GOP held back, to, as Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) put it, "honestly have more consultation with leaders on both sides of the Capitol," and with the Administration of President George W. Bush. Lott did touch on the GOP's priorities, however. These include education, tax cuts, Social Security and Medicare, and energy.

On energy, Lott indicated that Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Frank Murkowski (R-Ak.) is working up legislation to address the California electricity crisis, but his own comments indicated that the proposals will offer only more of the poison which created the crisis: He complained that California deregulated at one end, but not the other, and said that that is the cause of the crisis.

Other Republicans aren't waiting for Bush to send up all of his agenda before pushing ahead with it. Banking Committee Chairman Phil Gramm (R-Tex.), along with Zell Miller (D-Ga.), introduced a tax-cut bill that afternoon. Gramm's bill reduces tax rates across the board, and repeals the marriage penalty and the estate taxes. Gramm argued that the "weakening of the economy" since Election Day, makes the tax cut more of an imperative.

On the Democratic side, Minority Leader Tom Daschle (S.D.) described an agenda that sounds like the Democratic agenda of the last few years. It includes a Patients' Bill of Rights, a

Medicare prescription drug benefit, middle-class tax cuts, and an increase in the minimum wage. The Patients' Bill of Rights bill is based on the Norwood-Dingell bill that passed the House in the 106th Congress, and the minimum wage increase is for \$1.50 an hour, instead of \$1 an hour, "to make up for Congress's inaction," Daschle said. Other items include expanding the Children's Health Insurance Program to parents of eligible children, and what Daschle described as a "real lockbox" to protect Medicare and Social Security surpluses.

Bush Sends Education Plan to Capitol Hill

On Jan. 23, President George W. Bush sent to Capitol Hill an education program that he called "real education reform." The plan calls for annual testing of every schoolchild in reading and math, making schools accountable for their performance, and helping low-income schools make a transition to higher standards.

The most controversial aspect of his plan is likely to be on school vouchers. Bush avoided using the word "vouchers"; he said that "good options" must be provided children attending "persistently dangerous or failing schools." Many critics both in and out of Congress read that as meaning school vouchers. Other Administration officials did little to clear up the ambiguity. White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card, on CBS News' "Face the Nation" on Jan. 21, indicated that vouchers are a non-negotiable part of the program. Vice President Dick Cheney, on the other hand, told reporters after a meeting with the Senate Republican Caucus on Jan. 22, that the "options" could mean any of a number of things, including attendance at another

public school, or a charter school, or even hiring tutors. "The point is," he said, "there has to be a system of accountability."

Democrats proposed an alternative program. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.), leading the so-called New Democrats grouping, made good on his promise, and described a plan which, on the face of it, bears strong resemblance to what Bush has proposed. The Democrats' plan, according to Lieberman, provides resources to states and local districts to help students learn, and provides flexibility to meet local priorities and needs. "We want to hold them ultimately accountable for what this is all about: educating our children," he said. Lieberman noted serious differences with the President on a number of issues, including on school vouchers and how to target Federal funds. However, he claimed that Democrats otherwise share common goals with Bush.

McCain Pushes Forward Campaign Finance Reform

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) introduced his campaign finance reform bill on Jan. 22, along with 19 co-sponsors, including five Republicans. Motivating the bill on the Senate floor, he said, "We confront yet again a very serious challenge to our political system, as dangerous in its debasing effect on our democracy as war and depression have been in the past." In this context, he said that the presence of the co-sponsors in the Senate chamber indicates "that momentum is on our side." He said, "We will pass campaign finance reform legislation and finally follow the American people's will."

The major provisions of the bill in-

clude a ban on soft money contributions by corporations and labor unions, and increased disclosure of "electioneering communications" by independent organizations, a measure previously sponsored by Olympia Snowe (R-Me.) and James Jeffords (R-Vt.). It also codifies the U.S. Supreme Court's *Beck* decision, "to ensure that non-union members are not obligated to subsidize the political activities of labor unions."

About a half-dozen other campaign finance reform bills have been introduced, but only McCain's is attracting attention, because of his vow to push the issue early in the session. He told NBC News' Tim Russert on "Meet the Press," on Jan. 21, that it always takes time for a new administration to "get their act together," so, now is the time to push ahead. He warned that "the longer we wait, then we're into this [big money] morass again."

Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.), who opposes campaign finance reform, is saying only that the issue will be addressed "this year." According to news reports, the primary difference between McCain and President Bush on the issue is on so-called paycheck protection, which Democrats staunchly oppose, because it targets labor unions.

Export Control Reform Heads Gramm's Agenda

On Jan. 22, Senate Banking Committee Chairman Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) outlined an agenda for his committee that includes export controls reform, securities fees reduction, securities law reform, a look at government-sponsored enterprises, bankruptcy reform, and trade. However, Gramm

was not always specific as to what form some of these issues might take.

Gramm said that the export controls legislation that he will introduce is based on two principles: first, that no attempt should be made to control technologies that are already being mass marketed and are readily available, even if they may have defense applications; and second, applying stiff penalties, including life in prison, for the willful sharing of national security secrets with potential adversaries. He said that this is a new approach that recognizes that the Cold War is over, but that there are "plenty of mean people out there."

On securities law and government-sponsored enterprises, Gramm was far less specific. He said that he has no preconceived notions as to what reform might look like, only that "huge changes" have occurred in both areas which need to be examined. On bankruptcy reform, however, he was very specific. Besides making it harder for people with some financial assets to file under Chapter 7, Gramm also wants people with high-value skills to work off at least part of their debt.

While Gramm didn't expand on his trade agenda, later that afternoon he introduced two bills which authorize fast-track negotiations to bring both Chile and Great Britain into the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Boxer, Feinstein Address California Power Crisis

Sens. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) introduced separate bills on Jan. 22, to address the California electricity crisis. Both aim to bring some order to an out-of-control situation, but by different approaches.

Feinstein's bill would give the Secretary of Energy authority to take the same action that the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission now has to limit prices, but which it has so far failed to exercise. Feinstein said that the blackouts that have hit California so far, have jeopardized the economy, public safety, and people's lives. "Already, financial institutions and banks that have underwritten the debts of our utilities are being saddled with their own problems due to the uncertainty over whether they will be paid," she said. She also attacked California's 1996 deregulation bill, because "it relied almost entirely on a free market and assumed that there will be adequate energy supply," but instead it resulted in "an uncompetitive market and an absence of adequate supply."

Boxer's bill would establish an electricity rate cap for the entire Western Region, because a portion of California's power is being supplied from outside the state. "A regional price cap," she said, "will bring some stability to the market by ensuring a reliable supply for the entire Western Region, so that no state will confront a shortage." A companion bill has been introduced in the House by Bob Filner (D-Calif.).

Sen. Gordon Smith (R-Ore.) has announced that he will also be introducing electricity-related legislation. His bill would establish reliability standards for the country's entire electricity grid. Smith said that his bill "will allow energy providers and state utilities to prevent future problems that might arise from a lack of coordination."

It is not clear how much support any of these bills might get from the GOP leadership, however, given that President Bush has already said, that the Federal government has no role in addressing California's crisis.