

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Aviation Security Still Faces Challenges

On Jan. 23, the House Aviation Subcommittee held its first oversight hearing since the passage of the Transportation Security Act late last year. While much work has been done toward making airline travel safer since the Sept. 11 attacks, the Transportation Department and the airline industry still have a lot of challenges ahead of them. Integrating explosive detection equipment into airport terminal operations and extending positive passenger-bag match to connecting flights, are two problems that remain to be solved.

Subcommittee Chairman John Mica (R-Fla.) reported that it is evident from a tour of European airports that he and Rep. Peter Defazio (R-Ore.) took during the Winter recess, that "integrating explosive detection equipment [for screening baggage] into the airport environment will be much more difficult and much more expensive than many people realize."

In response, Transportation Department Inspector General Kenneth R. Mead reported that because of the difficulties with baggage screening, the number of employees that the department will have to hire will be more than 40,000, well above the original estimate of 30,000. He said the primary driver will be the explosive detection machines, because "if the machine alarms . . . you're going to have to have somebody take the bag off the machine." Mead couldn't give precise figures for the cost, other than to say, "It's a lot."

James Oberstar (D-Minn.), the ranking member on the full Transportation Committee, expressed concern that legislation that "was a very targeted specific list of actions" is not being fully implemented by the Bush Administration. He noted that there's still no requirement for a positive passenger-baggage match for a connecting

flight, which Oberstar insisted could stop even a suicide bomber. Undersecretary for Transportation Security John MaGaw admitted that the match was not being done for connecting flights, because it was too much to undertake both that, and matching for originating flights, at the same time. Oberstar called this failure the "Achilles' heel" of aviation security, and encouraged MaGaw to "vigorously work on that aspect of security."

Bush Meets With Hill Leaders on Medicare

On Jan. 28, President George Bush emerged from a meeting with members of Congress and Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson, and stated, "We need a comprehensive reform plan that includes prescription drugs for every senior." Bush added that Medicare needs to be "relevant for seniors today and for tomorrow," but the system as it currently is, is not.

Twenty minutes later, Thompson, accompanied by several members of Congress, fleshed out some of the details of Bush's latest package. He said that the package includes \$190 billion for Medicare reform, to include prescription drug benefits, and another \$77 billion for states to supplement Medicaid to provide prescription drug coverage for that plan. As for the difficulty of getting anything done in an election year, Thompson said, "We have to do it when we can do it. It needs to be done now, and we should address it as soon as possible."

Sen. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), one of the participants in the meeting, said that Congress can move forward on Medicare, this year, because, last year, \$300 billion was set aside in the budget resolution for Medicare reform, and then policy was debated for an entire year. "So," he said, "we'll be

able to move ahead now on policy . . . to get a very good program for seniors for prescription drugs."

Other participants in the meeting included Sens. Olympia Snowe (R-Me.), Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), and John Breaux (D-La.), and Reps. Billy Tauzin (R-La.), Bill Thomas (R-Calif.), and Colin Peterson (D-Minn.).

Campaign Finance Reform Petition Gains Majority

On Jan. 24, a discharge petition designed to force campaign finance reform legislation to the House floor acquired the last four signatures required to bring it to 218, a majority of members of the House. Under House rules, when a discharge petition gains 218 signatures, the bill addressed by the petition must come to the floor. Marty Meehan (D-Mass.) and Chris Shays (R-Conn.), the co-sponsors of the bill, were jubilant, since the last four signers signed faster than they expected. The collapse of Enron, and the related revelations of Enron's political contributions may have forced the issue, but the petition already had more than 200 signers before Enron's collapse.

The legislation still faces an uphill battle, however. Once the bill comes to the floor, which could be anytime between February and May, it faces three substitutes and up to ten amendments, as many by opponents of the legislation as by supporters. Even if the bill does pass largely intact, it then goes to conference with the Senate, where some think it faces a "real struggle." Rep. Michael Castle (R-Del.), a supporter of the legislation, said that the issue of the conference is "whether or not those who would not want campaign finance reform are going to be able to scuttle it by some procedural trick or substantive vote or whatever it may be, so it does not take place."