

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Kolbe, Stenholm Push Social Security Debate

The White House and Congressional Republicans have hinted that, in the aftermath of the Nov. 5 elections, they may be reordering some of their priorities. White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card indicated, during an appearance on NBC's "Meet the Press" on Nov. 10, that one of those priorities is Social Security reform, which President Bush made the centerpiece of his 2000 election campaign, but all but ignored in 2002. "It's important that we have a debate about Social Security reform," Card said, "but let's first focus on winning the war, securing the homeland, and getting our economy moving." When pressed on whether it could be taken up before the next election, he said, "I'm not sure that it can happen, next year. . . . The President wants to see everyone who is looking for a job be able to have a chance to get a job and, that's where he will be focussing."

Media pundits the following day took that to mean the White House would not pursue Social Security privatization until 2005, but at least two members of Congress do not want to wait that long. Representatives Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.) and Charles Stenholm (D-Tex.) told reporters on Nov. 12, that Social Security reform cannot wait. Kolbe argued that a number of Republicans who were attacked by their Democratic opponents on Social Security did not lose their elections, which means that "the public does understand that there is a problem. . . . They know it needs to be fixed."

Neither Kolbe nor Stenholm took Card's remarks to mean that the White House wants to wait until 2005. "We've been told by the White House legislative office," he said, "that Social Security does, indeed, remain a priority." Stenholm added that Card had said that homeland security is their

number-one priority for the lame-duck session, and that "nothing he said took Social Security reform off the table."

Logjam on Homeland Security May Be Broken

News reports on the morning of Nov. 13 indicated that a compromise was near on the bill to create a Department of Homeland Security. The deal, which Senators John Breaux (D-La.), Ben Nelson (D-Neb.), and Lincoln Chaffee (R-R.I.) signed on to the previous evening, would essentially give President Bush all the authority he has been seeking to override civil service rules for employees in the new department, but would slow down the process by giving government employee unions and Congress time to respond to proposed changes before they would take effect. Bush has been making a renewed push for the bill since the Nov. 5 election.

Other legislation left over from before the elections remains stalled. Outgoing House Republican Conference Chairman J.C. Watts (R-Okla.) told reporters after a meeting at the White House on Nov. 12, that the terrorism insurance bill probably would not be passed in the lame-duck session, and the appropriations bills will be put off until Jan. 7, with another continuing resolution. Other bills remaining on the agenda include bankruptcy reform and the energy bill.

War Issue Divides House Democrats

The entrance of Rep. Harold Ford (D-Tenn.) into the race to replace Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) as House Minority Leader sharply posed the divide among House Democrats over possible war with Iraq. The issue was

referred to by Martin Frost (D-Tex.), who told reporters on Nov. 7, that if Democrats try to make foreign policy the overriding political issue, "we will lose, because the country is with the President on that issue." Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) took the exact opposite viewpoint: "I don't think anybody's going to become the next Minority Leader of the Democrats that wants to go along with Bush on the war."

Because Conyers put the issue on the table, Ford has been forced to defend his vote for the Iraq war resolution, which Minority Leader Gephardt, in a deal with the White House in early October, had decided not to oppose. Ford, who spoke shortly after Conyers did, claimed that the unanimous vote in the UN Security Council, a few hours before, on a new resolution for the weapons inspectors to return to Iraq, "was a victory for those of us who supported" the resolution.

Meanwhile, Frost's withdrawal from the race for the leadership of the House Democrats cleared the way for Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) to win that position, Ford's bid notwithstanding. On Nov. 8, Pelosi released the names of 105 House Democrats, who she said had committed to support her. "In addition to that," she said, "I had a large number of private commitments that gave me a huge majority of the House Democrats."

In Pelosi's case, her liberalism, rather than her vote against the war resolution, is the issue that has been raised against her. Pelosi explained that the majority of the caucus chose her "as a person who can lead the caucus to victory, as a person who can build coalitions among various sectors of our caucus, a person who respects the differing points of view within our caucus." The House Democrats formally choose their leadership on Nov. 14.