

## Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

### House Committees Reject Plame Inquiry

An attempt by House Democrats to force Congressional oversight of the Bush White House came to naught on Feb. 25, when three House committees rejected a resolution of inquiry demanding documents from the Executive Branch relating to the exposure of undercover CIA employee Valerie Plame, the wife of former Ambassador Joseph Wilson.

The resolution of inquiry, introduced into the House on Jan. 21 by Rep. Rush Holt (D-N.J.), quickly gained 73 co-sponsors, and was referred to the Intelligence, Judiciary, International Relations and Armed Services Committees. The House Intelligence Committee on Feb. 3 voted 10-3 against reporting it favorably to the floor, and the other three committees all followed suit on Feb. 27.

During the Judiciary Committee mark-up, committee chairman James Sensenbrenner (R-Wisc.) argued that a parallel Congressional inquiry could substantially impact the grand jury investigation being conducted by special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald. Invoking the image of the Iran-Contra investigation, Sensenbrenner warned against "when Congress decides to engage in a political sideshow, rather than allowing a criminal prosecution" to reach a conclusion.

The Committee's Democrats rejected the notion that Congress cannot conduct its own inquiry while an Executive Branch investigation is under way. Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-Tex.) noted that, during the previous Administration, the Republican-controlled Congress was quick to jump on any allegation made against the President and never hesitated to launch an investigation, to the point of impeaching him for his personal sexual conduct. "Yet, when we seek to find the truth that bears upon the potential, if you will, loss of life of an undercover

CIA agent, also impacting on how we treat other CIA agents, we cannot find, not one committee, that is willing to do its duty."

### Hastert Reverses Course On 9/11 Commission

House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) on Feb. 27 agreed not to block a 60-day extension of the deadline for the commission investigating the 9/11 attacks to make its report to Congress. In a letter to the co-chairmen of the commission, former New Jersey Gov. Thomas Kean and former Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), Hastert wrote that he had been reluctant to support an extension of the deadline, because "I believe that the findings and recommendations that will be contained in your report may require immediate action by both the Congress and the Executive branch" and that extending the deadline from May 27 to July 26, may not give Congress time to act.

Two days earlier, Hastert had been singing a different tune. In spite of support from both the Senate and the Bush Administration for extending the deadline, Hastert had told the White House that having the commission's report come out in late July would politicize it at the height of the Presidential campaign. Hastert "thinks the report is overdue and we need to get the recommendations as soon as possible," said Hastert spokesman John Feehery.

Hastert's change of heart apparently had little to do with the substance of the commission's report, however, but rather was the result of blackmail from the Senate regarding an unrelated piece of legislation. Senators John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) threatened to block legislation to extend Federal highway programs for six months, unless Hastert changed his mind about the deadline. The

House had already passed a six-month extension of highway programs, scheduled to expire on March 1, and the Transportation Department warned that about 5,000 department employees faced immediate furlough, if the program were not extended. After Hastert agreed to extend the 9/11 commission's deadline, McCain and Lieberman dropped their objection to the highway bill, and it passed the Senate on a voice vote.

### Senate Takes Up The JOBS Act

On March 3, the Senate began work on a bill which is claimed, by both parties, to address the loss of manufacturing jobs. The Jumpstart Our Business Strength (JOBS) Act mostly addresses international tax provisions in order to satisfy a World Trade Organization complaint against the United States, but it also includes provisions intended to give American corporations incentives not to outsource jobs to other countries, including rewarding manufacturers who keep operations in the United States by lowering the top corporate income tax rate. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), speaking to reporters on March 2, said, "We can compete [globally] if we have a taxing environment and a regulation environment that allows our manufacturers to have a level playing field."

Democrats see the bill as an opportunity to critique President Bush's economic record. Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (S.D.) said that the bill "will give us a key opportunity to talk directly about jobs, how we can create them; to pass a bill that would put emphasis on manufacturing jobs in particular; but to discourage outsourcing and to ensure that if you have a job, you're going to get paid for it, especially if you work overtime."