

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Senate Rejects Extending Unemployment

A bipartisan attempt to extend an unemployment insurance program that expired last December, failed by one vote in the Senate on May 11. The amendment, co-sponsored by Senators Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) and George Voinovich (R-Ohio), would have extended temporary unemployment benefits until November 2004, for workers who have already exhausted their normal 26 weeks of benefits but are still unemployed. The amendment went down when Senate Budget Committee chairman Don Nickles raised a point of order against increasing spending to a level greater than that allowed by the Fiscal Year 2004 budget resolution. Overcoming such a point of order requires 60 votes, but supporters of the amendment were only able to round up 59. The one vote they could not get was that of Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), out campaigning for the Presidency.

Nickles, and other opponents of the Cantwell-Voinovich amendment, argued that because of the supposed recovery now under way, extended unemployment benefits are no longer needed. Nickles claimed that 1.1 million new jobs have been created in the last eight months and that jobless claims are also declining.

Cantwell replied by telling the Senate that "This is a debate about 1.5 million people who have lost their jobs and have not been able to find work and have been without benefits." As for Nickles' complaint that the amendment would cost \$9 billion, she noted that the underlying bill, a bill to make changes in U.S. tax law to comply with World Trade Organization rulings, included \$9 billion for the oil and gas industry, \$2.2 billion for clean coal, \$2.8 billion for synthetic fuel, and other expensive programs. "Where are the priorities in passing this kind of

legislation when we know that American men and women need our help and support?" Cantwell asked. The underlying bill passed by a vote of 92-5.

Murtha Blasts Bush Military Policy

Rep. John Murtha (D-Penn.), a Vietnam veteran and the ranking Democrat on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, came out swinging against the failure of Bush Administration's military policy in remarks to reporters on May 6. "Today our forces in Iraq are undermanned, under-resourced, inadequately trained, and poorly supervised," he said. "There's a lack of leadership stemming from the very top." He noted that he and many members of Congress have made many recommendations to the Defense Department to address numerous problems, but they appear to have been ignored.

Murtha detailed many of the conditions that he has heard about or observed in visits to Iraq, including of the 372nd Military Police Company, the same one involved in the abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. According to an e-mail he received from a member of that unit, the 372nd was re-assigned to duty providing protection to truck drivers in convoys, a mission for which they have no training or doctrine. The 372nd does not even, presently, have any officers assigned to it—no leadership. Murtha reported visits to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where soldiers recovering from war wounds expressed concern about lack of training and assignments to duties outside their specialties.

"Bad intelligence, inept planning, careless mistakes made by the architect of this war, have resulted in gross errors and underestimated distribution of resources that are needed," Murtha said. He said that the U.S. backed off

in Fallujah because "they found out they didn't have the people to do that. . . . We either mobilize [to expand the services] or we have to get out."

House Discusses Mideast Water Shortages

The physical economic requirements for peace in the Middle East have rarely been discussed; but the House International Relations Committee did just that, in a May 5 hearing, when it convened to discuss the lack of water in the Jordan Valley. Most of the discussion centered around desalination of sea water as the most viable solution. Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) noted that a plant capable of producing 100 million cubic meters of water will come on line in Ashkelon, Israel, next year. David Satterfield, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs, added that besides the Ashkelon plant, there are other proposals for shared Israeli-Jordanian desalination projects.

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.) maintained that the \$5 billion price tag for the proposed Red Sea-Dead Sea canal project is reasonable: "It behooves us as Americans and our government to try to say to all of the parties involved" that "the time is long since past when all factions should put aside other considerations and agree to work together on this one issue. It should not be tolerated that someone is putting some other political consideration, in the way of getting this project under way." In California, Rohrabacher added, "we would be in a desperate desert-like situation . . . if it wasn't for the fact that we decided at some point to take all things into consideration . . . and then move forward in what seems best for human beings . . . not just today's human beings, and future generations as well."