

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Budget Plan Stalls in Senate

President Bush, who traveled to Capitol Hill on May 20 to rally Republicans behind his agenda, could not break the logjam holding up passage of the Fiscal 2005 budget resolution. Neither could Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) nor Budget Committee chairman Don Nickles (R-Okla.). The bill is being held up in the Senate by four Republicans—Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins of Maine, Lincoln Chafee (R.I.), and John McCain (Ariz.) who are concerned that its budget enforcement provisions are too weak to deal with ballooning budget deficits. Frist's strategy was, reportedly, to jack up the pressure on the four moderates by forcing them to either vote for the budget or embarrass their own President. Frist did not follow through, and now nobody knows when the Senate might take the bill up.

The House voted up the budget resolution on May 19, but passage there was not a foregone conclusion, as the narrow 216-213 vote showed. Democrats blasted the \$2.4 trillion budget plan for doing away with fiscal responsibility. Rep. John Spratt (D-S.C.), the ranking Democrat on the House Budget Committee, noted that the budget, besides limiting the pay/go rule to one year, also foregoes the usual practice of running out budget projections for five years. "If you only take it out one year," he said, "there is no way in the world that we will ever get our arms around the deficit in that period of time."

Buried in the budget is an automatic increase in the statutory debt limit by \$690 billion, to \$8.1 trillion. Spratt noted that when President Bush took office, the debt limit was at \$5.9 trillion. Pelosi added that when President Clinton requested increases in the

debt limit in the 1990s, the Republicans "railed and ranted" that the Democrats were not being open about it.

Chambers Split on Military Base Closings

One of the most contentious issues on this year's Defense Authorization bill is another round of base closings, which was approved for the year 2005, in the 2003 Authorization Bill. In the House, supporters of a provision to delay the base closing process by two years, turned back, by a vote of 162-259, an attempt to kill a provision delaying the base closure round until 2007. Rep. Mark Kennedy (R-Minn.) and Vic Snyder (D-Ark.) had argued that delaying the process would drag out the uncertainty many communities are facing about whether or not the military bases near them would be closed. Kennedy told the House that "The critical nature of our war on terrorism and our military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan demand we go forward" with another round of base closings. Rep. Jeb Bradley (R-N.H.) noted in opposition that, unlike the 1990's, there will be no force reduction to go with the infrastructure reduction. And more base closings will result in the loss of irreplaceable industrial capacity and skills, Bradley said.

The Senate spoke on the issue two days earlier, when it rejected, by a vote of 47-49, an amendment to apply the 2005 round only to overseas installations. Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.), a co-sponsor of the amendment, argued that the Defense Department should take into account how it realigns its forces overseas before taking up domestic base closings. "We need to be careful about what we do domestically," he said, "because it could be affected by

what we do overseas." Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John Warner (R-Va.) expressed the same concern as supporters of base closings in the House: that delaying the process would be an additional hardship for communities located near military bases.

While the House completed work and passed its bill by a vote of 391-34 on May 19, it remains to be seen when the Senate will finish its version. Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) decided that when the Senate returns from its Memorial Day recess, its first order of business will be legislation on class action lawsuit reform. Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) urged Frist and his managers to do everything to get the defense bill finished. "We could do it, if we work some long days," Reid said, "but I predict if we go off this bill we will never finish it."

Partisan Fireworks in House on Iraq Policy

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi set off fireworks in the House when she described the Bush Administration as "incompetent" and "inexperienced" on Iraq. Speaking to reporters on May 20, Pelosi said, "The situation in Iraq and the reckless economic policies in the United States speak to one issue for me, and that is the competence of our leader. These policies are not working." She noted that the Bush Administration went into war without evidence supporting its decision and without heeding its own State Department on what would happen. "I think the time has come to speak very frankly about the lack of leadership in the White House, the lack of judgment."

The effect of the growing chorus of criticism of President Bush's Iraq policy could be seen the next day, in a hearing of the House Armed Services Committee on the Fiscal 2005 defense budget. Committee chairman Duncan Hunter (R-Cal.) spent most of the hearing in damage-control mode, leaping to the defense of the military at every chance, to mitigate any criticism of the war, regardless of which side of the aisle it came from.

But the fur really started to fly when Rep. Jeff Miller (R-Fla.) attacked Pelosi: "If she would attend just one of these hearings and listen to what is being said by those that are prosecuting the war on terror, and spend less time trying to bash those who are trying to protect this country, she might learn a thing or two," he huffed. A bit later, Rep. Ellen Tauscher (D-Calif.), who was extremely skeptical of the Pentagon plans for the June 30 transition in Iraq, noted that to learn anything about what is going on, you have to watch the Sunday talk shows or CNN. When Miller interrupted to suggest she watch Fox News, Tauscher retorted, "With all due respect, Mr. Miller, I sat here and listened to you politically attack the leader of my party . . . and if you're going to turn this into a political meeting, perhaps you should leave this building to do that."

Hatch Introduces New Immigration Reform

Senate Judiciary Committee chairman Orin Hatch (R-Utah), with other top members of his committee, introduced legislation to speed up deportation proceedings for aliens convicted of serious crimes. Hatch charged that the

present system, under which such aliens can appeal deportation orders via *habeas corpus* petitions, allows them to indefinitely stall their removal. "I want to emphasize," he said, "that this bill does not take away any substantive rights. Criminal aliens will still get judicial review like everyone else in deportation proceedings. . . . The bill simply targets those who intend to prolong their stay by filing frivolous petitions."

Hatch's bill also changes other areas of immigration law. It places the burden of proof in asylum cases on the applicant. It clarifies that deportation of illegal aliens can be effected even without a lack of formal acceptance by the home country." A third change would consolidate immigration review in the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, taking it away from district courts. "Immigration is a matter of national security and diplomacy," Hatch said, "and we need to speak with one voice on immigration matters and on immigration laws."

The possibility of actually passing any legislation on immigration this year appears remote, however. Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.), a co-sponsor of Hatch's bill, said "trying to get our arms around the whole immigration issue and to implement true reform of the entire system is going to be impossible, obviously, in this political year." Better to take shots at addressing individual issues, he suggested. Hatch's bill appears to be such an effort.

Hollings Blasts AIPAC

Sen. Ernest "Fritz" Hollings (D-S.C.) leveled a blast, during remarks on the Senate floor on May 20, at Vice Presi-

dent Dick Cheney and the imperialist war crowd that gave us the war in Iraq. Hollings was responding to accusations of anti-Semitism from Sen. George Allen (R-Va.), after a Hollings column appeared in South Carolina newspapers. The piece noted the lack of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, one of the prime rationales for invading that country: "With Iraq no threat, why invade a sovereign country? The answer: President Bush's policy of securing Israel." Hollings attacked a "domino school of thought, that the way to guarantee Israel's security is to spread democracy in the area." He named Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, former Defense Policy Board chairman Richard Perle, and columnist Charles Krauthammer as the leaders of this school of thought. He also named Cheney as the man who brought in Ahmed Chalabi "who made a mess of de-Ba'athification. . . ."

Hollings denounced the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) for the way it intimidates President and Congress on policy towards Israel. "You can't have an Israel policy," he said, "other than what AIPAC gives you around here." Newspapers had noted that Wolfowitz, Perle, and Krauthammer are all Jewish: "I can tell you right now I didn't have that in mind," Hollings said.

After recounting a discussion with French President Jacques Chirac, where Chirac told him and Allen that a peacekeeping force is needed to keep Israelis and Palestinians from killing each other, Hollings said, "My position is might does not make right. We have lost our evenhanded posture and reputation in the Middle East," backing the bulldozing of homes and the killing of children in the name of "defending Israel."