

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Democrats Charge GOP With Libel

A House Judiciary Committee report on a bill to make it a Federal crime to take a minor across state lines for an abortion without the consent of her parents, included such inflammatory language, that infuriated Democrats took to the House floor, on May 3, to demand that the report be amended to correct the record.

At issue were descriptions of five amendments that Democrats proposed in committee that would have excluded taxi and bus operators, close relatives, and certain other individuals from the bill's provisions. The committee report characterized each amendment as making exceptions for sexual predators so that they could escape prosecution under the bill's provisions, implying that the Democrats favored protecting such individuals so that they could continue to rape and abuse teenage girls.

Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), the ranking Democrat on the committee, told the House that descriptions so pejorative are "without precedent," and that earlier reports on the same bill from previous Congresses described identical amendments in neutral and objective terms. Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), who authored two of the amendments at issue, said that it is one thing to characterize the effects of an amendment in debate. "It is different, it is dishonest, it is a disgusting rape of the rules of this House to characterize the amendment in a one-sentence report that this was an amendment dealing with sexual predators," he said. "No, it was not."

Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner (R-Wisc.) claimed that the report "accurately described" the Democratic amendments, and the Democratic motion calling for the report to be amended was tabled on a straight party-line vote of 220 to 196.

Two days later, however, the committee submitted a supplemental report which changed the descriptions of the Democratic amendment back to neutral, objective language. Nadler said that the filing "is a tacit acknowledgment of the inaccuracy and untruthfulness of the original report . . . and renders much of what was said in its defense in the Committee on Rules and on the floor, as the saying goes 'inoperative.'"

War Supplemental Bill Sent to President Bush

On May 10, the Senate voted 100-0 in favor of the \$82 billion Fiscal 2005 supplemental appropriations bill that provides \$75.9 billion for the Defense Department to cover costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as \$1.5 billion for foreign assistance, \$635 million for border security, and \$656 million in tsunami disaster relief. The bill also includes the controversial "REAL ID" Act of 2005, which, among other things, establishes national standards for state-issued drivers licenses. The Senate approval followed a 368 to 58 vote in the House on May 5.

While objecting to the presence of the REAL ID Act as well as the lack of oversight of Iraq war spending in the bill, most Democrats felt that they had no choice but to vote for the bill, so that they would not be seen as not "supporting the troops." One of the few Democrats who voted against it, Rep. Lynn Woolsey (Calif.) demanded to know why the Congress was approving yet another huge supplemental bill for Iraq when "the previous three multibillion spending bills have been misused, improperly managed, and, in some cases, downright stolen." She noted the serious account-

ing problems that have emerged from money for the war and reconstruction in Iraq, and added, "Why are we voting on writing another check for a mission that has been so badly botched? Who is being held responsible for the misinformation that led us into war in the first place?" She called the bill "nothing short of highway robbery and the victims are the troops and the American people."

Democrats Propose Health-Care Agenda

On May 4, House Democrats rolled out their health-care agenda for the 109th Congress. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) told reporters that the three bills "would cut the number of uninsured Americans in half and improve health care throughout the nation." The three bills would allow uninsured people between 54 and 65 years of age to buy into Medicare, expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program to include coverage of working parents, and expand availability of health insurance for small businesses. "The majority of uninsured in our country work for a living, but they either can't afford the high cost of health-care coverage, or the premium prices are too expensive for their employers to pay for" said Rep. John Barrow (D-Ga.), the sponsor of the insurance bill.

The legislation also aims to reduce prescription drug prices by allowing Medicare to negotiate with the pharmaceutical industry for lower prices and by allowing the importation of lower priced drugs from Canada and other industrialized countries. The bills do not address collapsing health-care infrastructure, however, such as the closing of hundreds of hospitals over the last two decades.