

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

White House Threatens Veto of Highway Bill

The Senate escalated a growing confrontation with the White House on Feb. 12, when it voted up a six-year, \$318 billion Transportation Authorization bill by a vote of 76-21. The next day, White House spokesman Scott McClellan, calling it an "important first test" in reasserting control over the budget, vowed that if the bill reaches President Bush's desk in its present form, he'll veto it.

It appears unlikely, however, that the bill will be sent to the White House in its present form, since the House version of the bill is an even larger \$375 billion authorization. The Bush Administration, in its Fiscal 2005 budget, is proposing a much smaller \$256 billion program, which many members of Congress argue is much too small to meet the highway infrastructure needs of the country.

Supporters are selling the bill as a jobs bill. Sen. Kit Bond (R-Mo.), a Republican co-sponsor of the measure, said, on the Senate floor after the vote, that the highway portion of the bill, alone, will support over 2 million jobs. "These funds will support the much needed jobs and economic stimulus that our nation currently needs." Sen. Jim Jeffords (I-Vt.) noted that the jobs created by the bill will spread beyond simply road construction, to the firms that build the machinery and equipment required to do the work.

Senator Reid Blasts Silberman Appointment

Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) took to the Senate floor on Feb. 11, to call on President Bush to replace Judge Lawrence Silberman as co-chairman of the commission to investigate pre-war Iraq intelligence.

Reid described Silberman as "a

person who proudly wears the label of partisan even though he hides it as often as he can from the public." He charged that Silberman cannot be independent, and as long as he is co-chair, the commission cannot be independent.

Reid gave a summary of Silberman's partisan activities going back to his role as an aide in the 1980 Reagan-Bush campaign, during which he was suspected of involvement in the so-called October Surprise, the conspiracy to prevent the release of American hostages in Iran until after the election. He also described Silberman's role, as a member of the U.S. Court of Appeals for Washington, D.C., in overturning the Iran-Contra convictions of Oliver North and John Poindexter.

Silberman later collaborated with fellow appeals court Judge David Sentelle to install Kenneth Starr as independent counsel against President Clinton. Reid quoted extensively from the book *Blinded by the Right*, by David Brock, who described in great detail how Silberman directed the propaganda campaign against Clinton, to the point of proofreading Brock's articles to make sure they were "hard-hitting" enough.

"There are many respected Republicans in public service," Reid said, "who have demonstrated an ability to put their ideological and partisan views aside when it comes to what affects our nation. Silberman cannot meet that."

Democrats Slam Powell On Iraq War Intelligence

Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), the chairman of the House International Relations Committee, opened up a Feb. 11 hearing on the State Department's Fiscal 2005 budget by attempting to buffer the Bush Administration against any attempts to criticize it for

the fake intelligence used to justify last year's invasion of Iraq. He said that "the political season is upon us, and, as in war, truth is often the first casualty." He claimed that the criticism of the war, coming from those who initially supported it, "is that the President took action to defend this country instead of just sitting there." He then claimed that the Iraq War belongs in the larger context of the war on terrorism and is part of "an incredible success story, one that is still unfolding and one that is due almost entirely to the foresight and determination to act."

While most Republicans and some of the Democrats used the hearing to take up their pet issues with Secretary of State Colin Powell, Representatives Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.) and Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) charged that the Iraq War was waged under false premises. Ackerman admitted that, at the outset, he had supported the Bush Administration's case for war, "But in the aftermath, . . . finding no weapons of mass destruction and no plans in a decade thereto, and with shifting justifications from the war coming from the President . . . I can't help but feel the same unease that my constituents feel that we were sold a bill of goods." Ackerman added that with the failure to find the weapons that Vice President Dick Cheney asserted were there, the administration has a problem of an "utter lack of credibility."

Menendez echoed Ackerman's comments and added, quoting from a recent report of the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, that Iraq's weapons capability was effectively destroyed by the UN sanctions imposed in 1990, the 1991 Gulf War and the subsequent UN weapons inspections. Powell, both times, responded that his Feb. 5, 2003 presentation to the UN Security Council was properly debated and vetted, and that "we presented what we believed the truth to be at that time."