

Unemployment Compensation Bill Passes House

For weeks, Democrats in both the House and the Senate have been agitating for the consideration of legislation to extend Federal unemployment compensation benefits, and have been rebuffed by the GOP at every turn. Then, to the complete surprise of almost everybody, the GOP leadership brought to the House floor, on May 22, legislation to extend the compensation by 13 weeks, and another 13 weeks on top of that in states with especially high unemployment rates. The program, projected to help 2.4 million workers who are currently on unemployment, will expire on Dec. 31, 2003.

The Democrats, while happy that an extension of unemployment benefits was finally on the floor, were not pleased with the fact that the bill was brought to the floor under a rule that allowed no Democratic amendments, and that it provided no help to more than 1 million workers who have already exhausted their benefits and not found work. Rep. Ben Cardin (D-Md.) told the House that not only should assistance be provided to those workers, but that benefits should be extended 26 weeks, instead of only 13. The bill, he said, "falls far short of what we did in the recession of the early 1990s," when Congress passed, and then-President George H.W. Bush signed into law, unemployment extensions of over 26 weeks.

Other Democrats were even harsher in their critiques. Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.) called the bill "a statement by the President of the United States that he does not care about 1 million people," and said that his "junta" in the Congress simply rubber-stamped what he wanted. House Minority whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) noted that the Democrats have been asking for consideration of unemployment legislation for weeks, but the Re-

publicans did not act until their political analysts told them "do not go home without at least positively affecting some of these people."

The House passed the bill by a vote of 409-19, and the Senate followed suit the next day, passing it by unanimous consent.

Lugar Plans Iraq Policy Oversight

Though his criticism was mild in comparison to the Democrats, Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), at the outset of a hearing on May 22, indicated rather strong dissatisfaction with the Bush Administration's policy on Iraq. "I'm concerned," he said, "that the Administration's initial stabilization and reconstruction efforts have been inadequate. The planning for peace was much less developed than the planning for war. Moreover, the administration has not sufficiently involved Congress and the American people in its plans regarding costs, the method and the goals of reconstructing Iraq." He announced that he will hold a number of hearings "intended to help the committee perform its oversight function."

Lugar, however, left it up to committee Democrats to question the witness, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, on the inadequacy of post-war planning, and several of those questions focused on the current U.S. troop strength in Iraq. By Wolfowitz's own admission, the number of U.S. troops in Iraq has grown to about 160,000, from a level of about 120,000 during the peak of combat operations in late March and early April. Wolfowitz defended his rebuke of Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki, who told Congressional hearings back in February and early March, that it would take "several hun-

dred thousand" troops to secure Iraq. Wolfowitz claimed that the implication of Shinseki's remarks was "that we were going to treat Iraq like Japan or Germany and occupy it indefinitely, . . . and I thought it was very harmful, otherwise I would have preferred not to have commented on the whole subject."

Towards the end of the more-than-two-hour hearing, Lugar again complained that Congress did not really know the true situation, because the Congressmen had not been briefed by the Defense Department.

Senate Votes for Debt Limit Increase

On May 23, the Senate ended the suspense over the debt limit increase with a 53-44 vote to raise the statutory limit by \$984 billion. The House had already "deemed" the measure passed, on April 11, as a result of a provision in the Fiscal Year 2004 budget resolution. By this clever maneuver, House Republicans avoided a politically uncomfortable roll call vote on the matter. The Senate could not play the same game, however, and, instead, Senate Republicans waited until the last day before the Memorial Day recess before taking up the debt limit increase.

Because the House had already left town, Senate Republicans could argue that amendments had to be rejected, because otherwise the bill would have been thrown into conference committee, delaying final action until sometime in June, at the earliest. The Treasury Department had already warned that it would run out of borrowing authority by May 28. As a result, the GOP successfully beat back several Democratic amendments, including one to reduce the increase to \$350 billion, and another to wall off the Social Security trust fund from the rest of the budget.