

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

Robb gets boot from Senate budget post

Sen. Chuck Robb (D-Va.) was unceremoniously dumped from the Senate Budget Committee in early March, after the leadership of the Democratic Steering Committee decided to give him the boot.

Robb accused the panel's chairman, Sen. Jim Sasser (D-Tenn.), of engineering his removal because of Robb's fiscal conservatism. Robb was known on the committee for pressing for far deeper budget cuts than Sasser and the other Democrats wanted.

Both Robb and Sasser deny that his ouster was linked to his vote in favor of military action in the Persian Gulf. Robb was, however, one of the few Democrats who voted for giving Bush the mandate to go to war; he is acting as a rabid "Bush Democrat," a move which has not endeared him to some party colleagues.

Members demand Japan shell out for Gulf war

The House voted on March 7 to appropriate \$15 billion to pay for the Persian Gulf war, and tacked on an amendment sponsored by Rep. Jim Chapman (D-Tex.) which warned the coalition partners that Congress may consider further action "if the commitments they had made to supporting the Gulf war were not fulfilled."

Chapman claimed that "there are no direct threats here," but noted that the Americans had fought the war and "the least we can do is ask our allies to live up to their commitments." But the threats were explicit, with Chapman demanding "that our allies pay their commitments." Chapman warned, "The Congress will be watching," and "this Congress does have the ability, the au-

thority, and the will to act."

Chapman singled out the Japanese, who, he complained, were filtering their money through the Gulf Peace Fund for Middle East reconstruction purposes rather than turning the cash over directly to the United States. "If the nation of Japan does not make its commitment or instead says that the check is in the mail, but we addressed it to the wrong party," he said, we will "take strong action to test who our allies and friends really are."

Traficant scores AIPAC, urges aid cut to Israel

Rep. Jim Traficant (D-Ohio) warned the growing political muscle of the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in influencing legislation, in floor comments on March 6. "I think there are beginning to be some lobbies," said Traficant "which represent the interests of some other countries that are starting to weave themselves into the fabric of our government. They are becoming so strong that members here, if they do not know what is going on, they choose not to look." Traficant said that he thought that AIPAC was conducting "blackmail," and that it was time for Congress to take a look at AIPAC's operations.

Traficant also complained about the additional \$650 million which was being appropriated to Israel for damage done by the Scud missiles. Columnists Evans and Novak noted March 6 that AIPAC was armtwisting Congress for the funds. The White House had proposed \$400 million, Israel is asking for \$1 billion, and the \$650 million was a compromise figure. Traficant and others said that the \$3 billion that Israel receives annually

from the United States should be enough. Traficant wanted to cut aid to Israel by \$50 million.

Rep. Gus Savage (D-Ill.) said that it was contradictory to talk about banning arms in the Middle East without demanding the same of Israel. "After all," said Savage, "the most armed nation in the Middle East is Israel. The only one suspected of having nuclear capacity for arms is Israel." Savage also noted that the United States had given an additional \$400 million to Israel in housing loan guarantees on condition that they would not use the money to build housing in the Occupied Territories (the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), a promise which Israel, Savage noted, had reneged on.

An amendment by Rep. Tim Valentine (D-N.C.) also sought to restrict more aid for Israel, considering it inappropriate while the United States was "struggling under the weight of a recession." The full \$650 million was, however, included in the \$15 billion approved by the House.

Ethics scandal looms against Gulf war opponent

Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-Ore.) is the subject of an "ethics scandal" over alleged "gifts" he had received from the University of South Carolina at a time when the college was seeking a grant from the Senate Appropriations Committee, which Hatfield then chaired. The four gifts between 1983 and 1987, including two pieces of Steuben glassware, came from two discretionary funds under the control of James B. Holderman, then university president.

Hatfield denies that the gifts influenced his decisions on the \$16.3 million grant. "To suggest that I would be influenced by these gifts is

contrary to my convictions and contrary to my integrity," he said.

Hatfield's son Charles is alleged to also have received a full scholarship from another fund that Holderman controlled.

Hatfield was the only Republican to oppose the Persian Gulf war, and raised the ire of the Bush White House. Capitol Hill sources consider the scandal a vendetta.

In the Bush "Brave New World" order, such operations against opponents have become the *modus operandi* in Washington. Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) was the only one out of five senators involved in an S&L scandal who was seriously criticized by the Senate ethics committee. Cranston had been the key Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who pressed for a full investigation of Donald Gregg, Bush's appointee as ambassador to South Korea, and his connections to the Iran-Contra scandal, a connection which would have exposed Bush's personal ties to the scandal.

Black Caucus avoids Bush victory circus

House Resolution 95, which commends the U.S. commanders and forces in the Persian Gulf war and "acclaims the President for his decisive leadership, unerring judgment, and sound decisions with respect to the crisis in the Persian Gulf," passed on March 5 in an overwhelming 410-8 vote in the House.

The Congress has been anxious to hail the conquering Bush, but not everyone in Congress, fortunately, is prepared to give "Il Duce" acclaim for his genocidal escapade. The eight "no" votes came from members of the

Congressional Black Caucus, plus Rep. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.). Rep. Charles Hayes (D-Ill.) explained that he voted against the resolution because it "removed any accountability for the President as concerns his actions in the Persian Gulf."

Reps. Henry Gonzalez (D-Tex.), Ted Weiss (D-N.Y.), Donald Payne (D-N.J.), and Major Owens (D-N.Y.) answered "present" when their names were called.

Stage set for electric utilities deregulation

Hearings began in March before the Senate Energy Committee on amendments which would relax the federal law that regulates the electric utility industry. The issue is whether unregulated, profit-oriented corporations should be encouraged to enter the field of electricity production by relaxing current federal restrictions.

The Public Utility Holding Company Act of 1935 (PUHCA), which established the Tennessee Valley Authority during the Franklin Roosevelt administration, designates one enterprise which generates and distributes all the power in its assigned service area. Under PUHCA, an interstate company that owns 10% of a power plant, or 5% each of two power plants, falls under restrictive regulatory rules of the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Relaxing the legislation, as Senate Energy Committee chairman Sen. J. Bennett Johnston (D-La.) seeks to do, would allow other companies to come into the field allegedly to establish a more "competitive" price for electricity. The move is strongly supported by the Bush administration, which has introduced such legislation as a part of its

proposed National Energy Strategy.

But deregulation measures introduced into the savings and loan industry, the airline industry, and most recently into commercial banking, have led to disastrous results. Current regulations mandate that companies provide reliable power, but many electric utilities have to borrow money at usurious interest rates. Deregulation would not solve this problem; credits at low interest could.

The utilities question the reliability of allowing smaller, unregulated corporations into the field without the traditional "mandate to serve." The original purpose of the PUHCA legislation, was to provide electricity at reasonable costs to areas which would not be able to generate it locally. But as has been characteristic of the "free market" orientation of the Bush administration, the needs of the people do not play a very important role in economic policy decisions.

Good money sent after bad in S&L crisis

Congress moved a step further in providing an additional \$30 billion to rescue the nation's thrift industry. The Senate on March 8, in a 69-30 vote, approved the additional funds, while the House Banking Committee approved a similar proposal which will come to the floor shortly.

Most of the senators who voted for the additional monies did so reluctantly, but since no one has broached a real solution to the underlying economic problems of the thrift industry, a result of the deregulation policies of the Reagan years, legislators continue to try to plug the holes in the increasing leaks of the thrift bailout.