

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

Gonzalez: Panama invasion 'worse than Hitler'

Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.) attacked the Bush administration's slaughter in Panama in floor comments on Sept. 23, comparing U.S. actions to those of the Nazis.

Gonzalez related how the U.S. went in with F-117A Stealth bombers and "incinerated a whole area populated by black Panamanians who were living in these highly flammable wooden structures. . . . They incinerated them, and we can only make a guess as to how many. The best calculation that I would say would be the truth is that there were over 3,500. We had mass graves."

Gonzalez asked, "Is that not what we said the Nazis did when they occupied countries, when they overran them, when they occupied middle European countries and east European countries, the Slavic countries? . . . I remember pictures of the Katyn massacre and the like. And we also accused the Russians of those acts when they came back and were chasing the Nazi troops out. But we do not look at it that way when we do it. Now we call it something else. I know that at least from that aspect, from the standpoint of the abuse of words, this is the Orwellian world, but of all things, the President labeled the illegal invasion of Panama as Just Cause."

Senate scraps MX, SDI squeaks by

A day before the White House announced its "new defense policy" on Feb. 27, the Senate voted to block \$250 million for tests on a rail-mobile MX nuclear missile, one of the items President Bush announced would be scrapped. The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), already whittled down,

barely survived a vote Sept. 25 which would have cut \$1.1 billion off the Senate's proposed funding.

The B-2 bomber, which Bush excluded from the defense cuts, is in jeopardy in the Senate. The White House requested money for production of four more B-2 bombers, over and above the 15 which have already been approved. The additional funds were approved in a 51-48 vote, although the money appropriated for the B-2 cannot be spent until a separate vote on B-2 production is taken next year. The Senate also stipulated that the B-2 must pass certain flight performance tests before production can begin.

Discontent with NAFTA continues to brew

U.S. Trade Representative Carla Hills was asked back to Capitol Hill Sept. 26 to answer questions concerning the planned trade agreement with Mexico, indicating continued congressional concern over the nature of the agreement.

Earlier in the year, Congress voted to give the President "fast track" authority to negotiate the agreement. This meant that, although the agreement would have to be ratified by the Senate, Congress agreed to vote on a negotiated agreement without the right to offer amendments. Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-Oh.), who took the initiative to call Hills before the panel, expressed concern over the planned agreement in floor comments on Sept. 25: "This trade agreement will not set the stage for the Mexican market growing as a real export opportunity for United States goods. . . . Rather, it is more likely Mexico will become a cheap manufacturing platform for foreign companies to back-door their

goods into the United States market, as so many *maquiladora* plants do now."

Kaptur suggested that a real development policy must be aimed at repatriating Mexican capital which is now fleeing the country. "Any Free Trade Agreement must be conditional on the return of Mexican capital back home where it is desperately needed," she said. "This agreement should condition some of its benefits on that goal. . . . What North America needs, is a comprehensive development agreement rather than a narrow trade agreement. For our nations to reap the mutual benefits of trade expansion despite our different national histories, trade must be a part of a larger strategy for growth and change in Mexico, and for adjustment in the United States."

Banking panel concerned about utilities dereg

The proposed deregulation of the electric utility industry was the subject of hearings by the Senate Banking Committee, chaired by Sen. Don Riegle (D-Mich.), on Sept. 17. The hearing was unusual since the utility bill has already been passed by the Senate Energy Committee, which has direct oversight of the utilities. The Banking Committee acted on the basis that the bill also involves the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act, legislation enacted during the depression to maintain a "firewall" between commercial banking and the securities industry, which is in its purview.

According to the proposed bill, the utilities would not have to divest themselves of other interests so that the electricity portion of the business could be held hostage to other financial considerations. Also, regulators

currently require electric utilities to operate at 50% equity, but these new entities would likely operate with only about 10-20% equity, which is all that banks would require for loans.

Riegle said, UPI reported, that he was a "little nervous about the leveraging opportunities [for exempt wholesale generators]. I look around the room and I see a lot of money interests represented here. There are billions and billions of dollars at stake here." He fears that the search for financial relief on the part of the hard-pressed utilities industry could lead them to sacrifice the stability presently guaranteed to the consumer.

Congress kills AIDS disclosure plan

Dramatic testimony Sept. 26 by Kimberly Bergalis, a 23-year-old Florida woman who was infected with the AIDS virus by her dentist, failed to bring the Congress to act on measures offered to combat the spread of the disease. An amendment by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), which would have forced health care workers performing invasive procedures to inform patients if they have the AIDS virus, was eliminated by a House-Senate conference committee the same day Bergalis testified.

The Helms amendment mandated a prison term of at least 10 years if medical personnel failed to inform their patients. The Helms amendment had earlier passed the Senate 81-18, but was not passed by the House. The hearings with Bergalis were an attempt to win support for a similar House amendment, sponsored by Rep. William Dannemeyer (R-Calif.).

Also testifying was Miss Bergalis's father, George Bergalis, who

urged congressmen to "get off their duffs" on the AIDS issue. He attacked them for "prostituting themselves" to "special interest groups they're indebted to." Bergalis also attacked Congress for treating AIDS as a "political disease" and not a "disease disease."

The House-Senate conference which rejected the Helms amendment also rejected a compromise offered by Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Me.) and Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.). This proposal would have simply required health professionals engaged in invasive procedures to be tested for the AIDS virus and to inform their patients before conducting any invasive procedures, but without the criminal penalties. The Mitchell-Dole compromise was basically a reiteration of guidelines already suggested by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia.

Medical organizations lobbied hard to stop even the milder version. The *New England Journal of Medicine* went so far as to claim that the risk of getting AIDS from a doctor during surgery is 1 in 21 million for every hour of the operation, about the same chance that a person will be in a fatal accident on the way to the hospital. Liberal Democrats objected that the amendment would cut off all Public Health Service funds. "To go after this problem with a sledgehammer when a feather would do, that's excessive," claimed Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.).

Unemployment benefit extension faces veto

A House-Senate conference committee agreed Sept. 27 to legislation which would provide up to 20 extra

weeks of benefits to unemployed Americans. The redrafted legislation was approved by both the Senate and the House on Oct. 1. It extends extra benefits to unemployed workers who have exhausted the basic 26 weeks of unemployment compensation.

The legislation would affect about 3 million Americans caught in a state of semi-permanent unemployment. The measure passed the House with a veto-proof majority, and passed the Senate 65-35, two votes short of the two-thirds needed to override a presidential veto. Bush has opposed the bill, claiming it would break the budget deficit agreement from last year and be an admission that the economy is in "recession."

House initiates probe of 'October Surprise'

The House appointed a special task force Oct. 1 to investigate allegations that the 1980 Reagan-Bush campaign delayed the release of American hostages from Iran until after the 1980 election. Eight Democrats and five Republicans will serve on the panel.

The panel will be chaired by Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), who was the co-chairman of the congressional Iran-Contra investigative committee. The exact form of the investigation is still the subject of heated debate. Democrats want the investigation to carry over until next fall with some of the hearings be held in closed session. Republicans want a six-month time limit placed on the investigation so that it doesn't carry into the presidential election campaign.

The panel will have the power to subpoena witnesses, and congressional leaders hope to uncover new evidence. A separate investigation is being conducted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.