

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

Aspin whitewashes deaths in Panama invasion

At a press conference on Aug. 4, House Armed Services Committee chairman Les Aspin (D-Wisc.) issued a report on the estimated civilian casualties of Operation Just Cause, the Dec. 20, 1989 invasion of Panama, which claims that there were less than 100 civilian deaths.

Shortly after the invasion, former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark visited Panama to conduct an independent investigation of the civilian casualties. Uncovering mass graves, he and others in Panama estimated that as many as 4,000 civilians had been killed in the operation. Southcom, the U.S. military command in charge of the invasion, at the time claimed only 89 Panamanians, military and civilians, had died in the invasion, and denied the existence of mass graves. Five months later, a public exhumation of the grave identified by Clark was carried out in the presence of CBS television cameras for "60 Minutes," and 123 bodies were uncovered, some bound hand and foot. Reportedly there are another 10 such graves that have not been opened.

But Aspin, in an effort to remove such a "stain" on U.S. military operations, fearing, as Aspin expressed it, that "the question will come up later when the question of going to war comes up," is floating a figure of less than 100 civilian casualties. Admitting that they "will never be able to generate a precise number," Aspin maintains that the claims that thousands were killed were "supported by no evidence."

The subcommittee responsible for the investigation, under the chairmanship of Rep. Nick Mavroules (D-Mass.), based itself on what was presented as the names of all people reported missing in the aftermath of the invasion, lists which had been

cleansed of "duplications." They then took the total number of women on that list and, under the assumption that 50% of the innocent bystanders shot would have been women, they multiplied that number by two in order to get the total number of "innocent" killed.

The rest of the civilian dead were either members of the Dignity Battalions, or looters, they claim.

House passes IMF quota increase

The House passed the Freedom Support Act on Aug. 6 in a 255-164 vote. Supposedly to assist the republics of the former Soviet Union, in fact its main provision mandates a \$12 billion quota increase to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Many conservative Republicans voted for the bill, arguing that the United States could not ignore this "historic chance" to propel Russia toward democracy. Many Democrats opposed the bill as foreign aid which would drain resources from needs here at home. Others felt that the bill lacked any conditions which would assure that Russia remain on the road of economic "reform."

The title of the bill was a misnomer, since aid to Russia and the other former Soviet republics had been covered in other legislation. The act would simply assure that the U.S. would bear its share of the IMF quota increase, a precondition for any IMF help to Russia.

The real nature of the bill was recognized by some like Rep. Hunter Duncan (R-Calif.), who warned that the money authorized for the quota increase "will go not for food or to help the poor, but instead will go to aid big banks all over the world." The pas-

sage of this legislation, Duncan continued, "will certainly be good for the bureaucrats at the IMF, but it will do almost nothing at all for the average Russian citizen."

Congress shies away from taking up NAFTA

The upcoming election has caused some backers of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to place conditions on their support for a treaty. Last year, Congress gave President Bush "fast track" authority to negotiate the agreement, allowing Congress only to vote the treaty up or down without amendment.

The fast track authority was partially abrogated when the House voted 362-0 on Aug. 6 (with 72 abstentions) in favor of a resolution by Reps. Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) and Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) which declared that Congress would not approve any trade agreement "if such agreement jeopardizes U.S. health, safety, labor, or environmental laws." This would include violations of legislation like the "endangered species legislation," the Clean Air Act, and other environmental regulations.

Attempt made to restore abortion counseling funds

On Aug. 6, the House voted 251-144 to eliminate the so-called "gag rule" which prevents federal funding for medical programs where abortion is a method of family planning.

Opponents of this restriction claim that it keeps the patients at these clinics from receiving all the information about the options they have facing pregnancy (i.e., information on abortion), and have attempted to turn the

matter into an issue of freedom of speech. This idea has been rejected by the opponents of abortion. As Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.), a strong backer of the "right to life," put it, "This is not a free speech issue. It is an issue concerning federal payments for the facilitation of abortion."

Smith noted that Planned Parenthood had spent a reported \$5 million to nullify the restrictions on abortion counseling and referrals at federally funded clinics. The legislation will now go to the Senate. President Bush has threatened to veto the legislation.

House GOP targets Gonzalez for Iraq probe

On Aug. 4, House Minority Leader Bob Michel (R-Ill.) presented a resolution calling for an ethics investigation of House Banking chairman Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.), to determine whether he has "publicly disclosed classified information," a violation of House rules. The move is blatantly political, because Gonzalez had initiated the probe into the Bush administration aid to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War.

Michel himself admitted that he introduced the resolution against Gonzalez "with great reluctance." The accusation that Gonzalez had disclosed classified documents in his regular revelations on the House floor of the Bush pre-Gulf war policy towards Iraq, stem from accusations raised by CIA head Robert Gates. The Bush administration had been upset by Gonzalez's exposure of their policy and what seems to have been attempts by the administration to cover up that policy.

The Gonzalez revelations have led the House Judiciary Committee to request that an independent prosecutor be assigned to the case. Attorney Gen-

eral William Barr has refused to take that step.

Michel warned that failure to restrain Gonzalez could justify the Executive branch withholding official secrets from Congress and, reflecting the arguments of the administration, that the Gonzalez revelations jeopardize "the security interests of our allies and the lives of our intelligence officers and their agents."

Mitchell delays 'Freedom of Choice' legislation

Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Me.) admitted on Aug. 5 that he would not introduce the Freedom of Choice Act during the present session of Congress. Democrats had hoped to pass the legislation, which is faced with a threatened presidential veto, in order to use it to mobilize abortion-rights advocates to the Democratic banner.

Mitchell had hoped that the legislation would be passed in the House first where there was less chance of crippling amendments being added. But the failure of Republican abortion-rights supporters to agree to restrictions that would bar consideration of popular amendments, such as requiring parental notification when a teenager seeks an abortion, have delayed the legislation there.

Senate cut in SDI could hamper defense bill okay

In a surprise move on Aug. 7, the Senate refused to block a proposal to trim \$1 billion from the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) budget over and above the \$1.1 billion reduction introduced by the Senate Armed Services Committee. Opponents of the cuts, led by Sen. Malcolm Wallop (R-Wyo.), are now stalling passage of the Defense

Authorization bill in order to prevent the cuts.

With the Senate scheduled to recess on Aug. 11, Armed Services Committee chairman Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) said the bill could be brought up again in September, but only with "extraordinary cooperation." If not, it would be impossible to rescue it before the next fiscal year begins, he said.

Senate calls for military action in Bosnia

The Senate passed a resolution introduced by Sen. Dennis DeConcini (D-Ariz.) in a 74-22 vote on Aug. 11, which urges President Bush to call for an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council to authorize "all necessary means, including the use of military force," to provide humanitarian relief to civilians in Bosnia-Herzegovina and to gain access to refugee camps in all of the republics of former Yugoslavia. The resolution also calls for the establishment of a tribunal to investigate allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity by the Serbians.

Earlier in the day, the Senate Armed Services Committee heard testimony from a variety of top military people, including a representative of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Maj. Gen. Lewis Mackenzie of Canada, who led the U.N. peacekeeping force in Sarajevo for five months, who all recommended against the use of military force in the relief efforts.

Action on the resolution had been delayed, however, when Sen. John Warner (R-Va.), ranking minority member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, objected that the language amounted to a "blank check to the U.N." that could lead to commitment of U.S. ground forces.