Congressional Closeup by William Jones

Brown: No more cuts in Space Station Freedom

At a press conference on May 10, Rep. George Brown (D-Calif.), chairman of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology, announced that the only program for Space Station Freedom which he intends to support is one based on the current design.

In order to reduce funding for the space station over the next five years, the Clinton administration has required NASA to consider three redesign options, none of which preserves the integrity of the current design. NASA will have that redesign effort completed in the next few weeks, but Brown apparently decided to take the offensive and let the White House know what his recommendations will be to Congress.

Brown introduced H.R. 2200, which authorizes the NASA budget for fiscal years 1994 and 1995. The bill would authorize $1.9 billion per year over the next five years for Space Station Freedom, which is half a billion dollars more than the most optimistic administration redesign option. (In the current funding profile, Freedom funding would peak at $2.6 billion next year.)

Space subcommittee chairman Ralph Hall (D-Tex.) stated at the press conference that the bill "resists the temptation for sweeping changes" in Freedom, which has undergone six redesigns in the past nine years.

Brown insisted that the three options the administration gave NASA for the redesign "do not meet reasonable criteria for a continuing program." In introducing the bill on May 20, Brown noted that the problem was a "political" one and not an "engineering" one. "I do not believe," he said, "that any design other than the Freedom-derived option will carry the support of the House, and we risk losing the project altogether." Brown also warned that if the space station program is killed," it could trigger "a whole unwinding of NASA."

Derision greets 'joint action plan' on Bosnia

The conclusion of an agreement between the United States, Great Britain, France, and Russia regarding the creation of "safe havens" in Bosnia, announced by the foreign ministers of those countries at a special press briefing at the U.S. State Department on May 22, came under immediate fire from a number of influential senators and congressmen.

Sen. Robert Dole (R-Kan.), speaking in Waterville, Maine, where he gave a commencement address at Colby College, said that the agreement was equivalent to "writing off Bosnia as a state." In a joint statement issued by Dole and Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), the two Republican leaders warned that "the inability of NATO to act effectively to contain and stop a major war on European soil is bound to raise grave doubts among both the American people and the Congress about whether the enormous yearly investment we make in NATO is reaping sufficient benefits."

In a statement issued on May 23, Dole said that Clinton should not allow our European allies and Russia to block the lifting of the arms embargo. "Like every other member of the United Nations, Bosnia-Hercegovina has the right to self defense. It has been denied this fundamental right to survival by the U.N. Security Council. The international community may be unwilling to help defend the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Bosnia-Hercegovina, but it should not stand in the way of the citizens of Bosnia." Dole insisted that lifting the arms embargo would not involve the United States in a "quagmire," nor would it involve significant U.S. resources.

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Daniel Moynihan (D-N.Y.), speaking on "Meet the Press" on May 23, said that the administration was "legitimizing genocide" by going along with the agreement. "The moral basis of the world international order in the aftermath of Bosnia is weakened as it has not been since the 1930s," said Moynihan. "The world that watched has committed a grave sin."

Dreier warns side pacts could endanger NAFTA

In comments on the House floor on May 19, Rep. David Dreier (R-Calif.) warned that the "side agreements" on environmental and labor conditions now being negotiated as part of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in Ottawa, Canada could destroy support for the treaty in the Congress.

The treaty, backed by the free-trade lobby, will drive down wages in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada.

Dreier attacked the "side agreements" as an unlawful intrusion on the part of multinational entities into the making of national policy. "Trade sanctions, which will involve revoking NAFTA benefits, could be imposed by two of the three nations when one country is judged to be not enforcing a particular domestic labor or environmental law," said Dreier.

Such side agreements, he warned, "will clearly jeopardize the support of those of us in the Congress who have been traditional proponents of free trade, and I believe create the potential to doom the implementation of this very important North American free-trade agreement."

Committee hears plea for financial deregulation

Representatives of the commodities markets, commercial and investment banking, stock markets, and mutual funds proposed a series of measures to the Senate Securities Subcommittee on May 20, which they said could sharpen their competitive edge abroad, UPI reported. In fact, their calls for revamping of the federal regulatory system amount to more deregulation, which has fueled the destruction of the U.S. economy.

"There is no specific legislation before us today, but we hope to lay the groundwork for future actions by this subcommittee and by the full committee," said Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.).

John Sander, the chairman of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, proposed dumping the current regulatory structure governing the U.S. financial markets, complaining it represented an outmoded, 1930s-era set of duplications and inefficiencies. "It needs more than a quick fix. It needs to be razed," he testified.

Observing that Congress is filled with new lawmakers and that the Securities and Exchange Commission is undergoing a changing of the guard, Sander called for a consolidation of the "unwieldy" financial regulatory system into a single, cabinet-level department.

William Donaldson, the chief of the New York Stock Exchange, called for certain regulatory changes, including discouraging the increasing of competition between auction and dealer markets. Other requests were for regulation of domestic markets and study of explosive growth of trading in derivative products.

Timothy Hartman, the chairman of NationsBank West, testified that rules must be eased to allow banks to compete more freely with non-bank rivals. "The need for comprehensive reform of banking regulations is greater than ever," he said. "The issue is whether the United States' banking system will become globally competitive or fade into irrelevance." The banking industry and the securities business is separated by the 1933 Glass-Steagall Act. Hartman said the 60-year-old law needs rethinking.

Lesbian activist confirmed to HUD post

The Senate voted 58-31 on May 24 to approve President Clinton's nomination of homosexual activist Roberta Achtenberg as an assistant secretary of housing and urban development in charge of fair housing and equal opportunity.

Despite angry debate over the Achtenberg nomination, with many senators warning that Achtenberg would use her office to promote homosexual causes, the "politically correct" majority succeeded in carrying her nomination through. Achtenberg gained notoriety in leading a campaign to deny United Way money to the Boy Scouts because of their refusal to allow openly homosexual men to become scoutmasters.

Achtenberg is the first openly lesbian nominee to be confirmed by the Senate for high federal office. Countering the arguments of the nominee's supporters for "tolerance," Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole (R-Kan.) clarified that "showing tolerance and respect should not force us to embrace an ideological agenda that most Americans do not accept."

The nomination was the most contentious yet of President Clinton's choices to be considered by the Senate. Of the 110 officials confirmed to date, only three have been subjected to roll-call votes.

Campaign finance reform still faces hurdles

President Clinton's campaign finance legislation, a show-piece in the President's commitment to supposedly change Washington's ways, is running into a considerable degree of trouble on Capitol Hill. The legislation would limit candidates' spending and curb the influence of special interest money in campaigns.

Five Republican senators, whose votes are needed to break a threatened Republican filibuster of the bill, are urging a more radical alternative which would sharply reduce or eliminate contributions that House candidates can take from political action committees (PACs) set up by unions, corporations, and other groups to raise money for candidates in hopes of influencing legislation.

Under Clinton's proposal, Senate candidates are limited to $2,500 in PAC contributions, while the limit for House members is $5,000. House members from poor districts often have a difficult time raising their funds privately and are therefore more dependent on PAC funds.

However, any attempt by the Senate to change the House limits could lead to problems between the two chambers. The five "swing" senators have warned that there must be comparable rules in the Senate and the House if they are to support the legislation.