

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

House rejects Balanced Budget Amendment

The House rejected on March 17 a proposed constitutional amendment which would require a balanced federal budget by the year 2000. The final vote on the measure was 271-153, just 12 short of the two-thirds majority required. One hundred and seventy-two Republicans and 99 Democrats supported it.

Although the measure had earlier been defeated in the Senate, its backers felt that a victory in the House would give them the boost needed to take the issue up again next year. "Austerity Democrats," led by Charles Stenholm (D-Tex.), tried to rally support among Democratic ranks for the amendment.

Opponents argued correctly that enactment of the amendment would require draconian spending reductions that would throw the economy into a tailspin and undermine administration legislative efforts. "Let's not tinker with the most fundamental document in our democracy and try to do something that probably won't work anyway," warned Majority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.).

An alternative proposed by Reps. Robert Wise (D-W.V.) and David Price (D-N.C.), who supported the Balanced Budget Amendment when it last came up two years ago, was also defeated.

Rostenkowski win gives Clinton needed support

The primary victory of House and Ways Committee Chairman Dan Rostenkowski (D-Ill.), who has been the target of politically motivated judicial investigations, has helped consolidate support for the administration in Congress. President Clinton, against the

advice of some of his advisers, personally went to Chicago to throw his support behind Rostenkowski. A defeat for Rostenkowski would have dealt a serious blow to the President's chances of passing his health care program and other legislative proposals.

Rostenkowski is, however, not home free. He still faces a possible indictment, which could lose him his chairmanship. Litigation and criminal investigation have increasingly become a primary vehicle used by opponents to unseat incumbents. The "Whitewatergate" attack on the Clintons, which is presently being avidly pursued by Republican congressional leaders, is a prime example of this tactic.

Rostenkowski also faces a Republican electoral challenge in November, although in his heavily Democratic district, this may prove to be less of a problem.

'Three strikes' measure gains committee backing

The House Judiciary Committee approved on March 17 a series of anti-crime measures, including one that would impose life imprisonment for offenders convicted of three violent crimes. The "three strikes and you're out" provision was passed by a 27-8 vote.

Under current law, federal judges can reduce inmates' sentences for "extraordinary and compelling reasons" at the request of the Bureau of Prisons. The committee allowed a softening amendment by Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) to go to the floor for consideration. This would allow the release of three-time losers who have served 30 years and reached age 70 on condition that the Bureau of Prisons certifies that they are no longer dangerous.

The committee also approved by a

vote of 25-10 a bill that would authorize federal courts to impose the death penalty for another 66 crimes. Currently, the only federal capital crimes are murder related to a major drug ring and air piracy.

The "three strikes" proposal met some unexpected opposition from the nation's federal judges, who expressed concerns about the measure. In a letter dated March 15, U.S. District Judge Maryanne Trump Barry of New Jersey, head of the criminal law section of the Judicial Conference of the United States, said that provisions in the pending crime bills "would have substantial negative impact on the federal courts and would constitute a watershed in the role of the federal judiciary." She specifically attacked a provision in the bill to make offenses traditionally prosecuted by state authorities into federal crimes. "We must keep in mind," Barry wrote, "that the state courts have, throughout our nation's history, remained the primary forums for criminal law enforcement."

In an interview on March 16 cited by the *Washington Post*, Barry also called the "three strikes" proposal "totally inconsistent with any fair or rational sentencing scheme. The individual defendant isn't considered, nor are the facts of the situation."

GOPers seek reevaluation of policy toward Russia

In a speech delivered to the *American Spectator* magazine dinner on March 7, Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) said that Russian participation in the Partnership for Peace initiative "is a means of derailing NATO enlargement," and an opportunity to solidify Russia's interpretation of its rights and interests in the "near abroad." Lu-

gar warned that by "making Russia the fulcrum of U.S. policy," the Clinton administration "risks ceding to Moscow a virtual veto over vital U.S. interests on issues like Bosnia, the future of NATO, and eastern Europe."

If bringing eastern Europe into NATO were the most appropriate means for promoting stability and democracy there, Lugar said, it should be done "preferably with Russia's understanding, but if necessary, without it."

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), in a statement to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Roundtable on March 3, said, "Giving the Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Hungarians and others a date certain for NATO membership should they meet a specific set of political and economic conditions, is sound security policy. . . . Why should the U.S. forego opportunities to expand the frontiers of NATO ever farther from the plains of Germany even while Russia is busy coercing other nations into a confederacy under Moscow's control?"

Bipartisan group tries to restore defense funds

A bipartisan group of senators including Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, vowed to restore funding requested by the administration for defense, after the Senate Budget Committee unexpectedly knocked an additional \$43.2 billion out of the administration's five-year spending plan on March 17. Four Democrats joined the committee's nine Republicans in a 13-8 vote to support additional but unspecified cuts recommended by James Exon (D-Neb.) and Charles Grassley (R-Iowa).

Committee Chairman Jim Sasser

(D-Tenn.) warned that the additional cuts would be taken out of the defense budget, something which both Exon and Grassley are expected to oppose. Exon is a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Robert Byrd (D-W.V.), in an attempt to get the cuts restored, threatened to support shifting the new cuts to defense.

Even more draconian cuts had been proposed by Pete Domenici (R-N.M.), the ranking Republican on the Budget Committee, and Phil Gramm (R-Tex.). They wanted a measure which would eliminate the deficit by fiscal 1999. They did not pursue the issue, however, when fellow Republicans objected that such a move would hurt them in the fall elections.

Penny proposes fund for Middle East development

Rep. Tim Penny (D-Minn.) introduced a sense of the Congress resolution calling for the establishment of a Middle East Development Initiative "to provide development assistance grants and loans to countries, communities, and organizations in the Middle East region which promote the peace process in the region." The Penny resolution calls for \$260 million in funding annually from FY 95 through FY 97 for the initiative.

The Palestine Liberation Organization would be eligible for funds when they conclude a peace agreement with Israel. Other countries in the region which have not established diplomatic relations with Israel and Egypt would not be eligible for funds. Penny envisions funding the proposal by taking about 5% of the funds currently earmarked for bilateral assistance provided to Israel and Egypt.

In comments on March 21, Penny added that the funding should be aimed at promoting "sustainable development." Erring on the side of "political feasibility," Penny said that the funding should be "focusing on non-military, small-scale, person-to-person economic development. . . . Despite the recent setbacks, I am confident that the peace process will continue and that significant progress will ultimately be achieved on the issue of regional security."

Voluntary school prayer backed by House

The House voted 345-64 on March 21 to withhold federal education funds from school districts that prohibit students from engaging in voluntary prayer in public schools. The measure was sponsored by Sam Johnson (R-Tex.).

The language in the Johnson amendment follows closely a 1989 amendment by then-Rep. William Dannemeyer (R-Calif.), which passed the House by a goodly margin but was deleted in conference.

The Johnson amendment would bar federal education funds to any state or school district "which has a policy of denying or which effectively prevents participation in prayer in public schools by individuals on a voluntary basis." The school prayer amendment was attached to a \$12 billion bill to renew for five years federal aid to elementary and secondary programs.

Over the last 30 years, the U.S. Supreme Court, under heavy freemasonic influence, has ruled that officially sanctioned prayer in public schools is unconstitutional, but upheld the 1984 Equal Access Act, which allows students to meet as religion clubs.