

## Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

### Republicans give up on tax cut bill

The Congressional Republican leadership all but admitted that its four-week lobbying campaign, conducted during the August recess, failed to create the groundswell necessary to force President Clinton to sign the \$792-billion tax-cut bill that was passed at the beginning of August. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) told reporters on Sept. 8 that the GOP priority will be to set aside the money that would have gone into the tax cut for Social Security, instead. He complained that the President "doesn't want a fair tax relief package; it's obvious that he wants to spend more money, and it's obvious that he wants to break the caps and spend Social Security money for other programs."

Both Lott and House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Tex.) indicated little likelihood of a compromise with the White House on the issue.

Not surprisingly, Democrats were gleeful at the news. Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) said, "It is really quite remarkable that the Republican tax cut is as big a bomb as it appears to be." House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.) added on Sept. 9 that the Republicans had gone for too large a tax cut, and one focused largely on corporations and the wealthiest Americans. He suggested the GOP "get back to" a smaller middle-class tax cut, and focus on other priorities, including paying down debt, funding Social Security and Medicare, and education.

Gephardt added that the problems with the appropriations bills all go back to the budget resolution passed last spring. The GOP "passed their budget," he said. "It's now their responsibility to implement their budget. If we had had a compromise on the budget at the beginning, a blueprint

we could all agree on . . . maybe we'd have a different situation going on."

However, while the appropriators call for lifting the budget caps imposed by the 1997 Balanced Budget Act, the leaders in both parties say that won't happen. Republicans insist the President's budget busts the caps, and Democrats insist it does not; they refuse to support appropriations bills which come in below the caps, but severely cut programs the President supports.

### Senate panel holds hearings on Marianas immigration

The Senate Energy and Commerce Committee held a hearing Sept. 14 on a bill to apply federal immigration laws to the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands. Both Committee chairman Frank Murkowski (R-Ak.) and ranking Democrat Daniel Akaka of Hawaii expressed a desire to avoid the partisan rhetoric that has characterized discussion of the CNMI in other forums, and so the hearing was low-key and focussed only on immigration issues. (The CNMI has become notorious for the labor conditions prevailing there: tantamount to indentured servitude.)

In opening remarks, Murkowski and Akaka both made the point that the CNMI is U.S. territory and that federal laws should apply there as elsewhere in the U.S., especially immigration laws. Akaka, underlining that immigration was the only subject of the hearing, emphasized that the immigration situation in the CNMI has become an international embarrassment to the U.S., with numerous countries complaining of the treatment of their nationals working there.

The first witness, CNMI Governor Pedro Tenorio, cavilled that the bill at issue would give the administration

sole power to set immigration standards, without any input from the CNMI. He added that the bill would not require the Justice Department to take into account the impact federal immigration standards would have on the CNMI's economy, which depends heavily on imported contract laborers, especially in the garment and tourism industries, the latter of which has been hit hard by the financial crisis in Asia. He also complained that the bill ignores his administration's reform efforts. However, when Murkowski and Akaka pressed him to submit legislative recommendations that would bring the bill closer to addressing the concerns of both Congress and the CNMI administration, all he could say was, "We're not yet ready to give you our recommendations."

### Congress finds plate full with crowded agenda

Members of Congress returning from the summer recess were presented with a crowded agenda for the rest of the year. Besides trying to finish work on appropriations bills, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott told reporters Sept. 8 he plans to take up bankruptcy reform and a nuclear waste bill, both before the end of September. He also named the Social Security "lockbox" and the reform of Medicare and Medicaid as issues to be dealt with before year's end.

Democrats added to that list public debt reduction, education, aid to agriculture, and the passage of a "meaningful" patients' bill of rights. Other issues the Democrats plan to insist on include campaign finance reform, raising the minimum wage, and ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle declared that "we will fight

and we will aggressively pursue this agenda and use whatever vehicles we have available to us to make sure that the Senate debates them in due course." House Majority Leader Dick Armey indicated on the floor of the House Sept. 9 that a minimum wage bill probably will be considered in that body before the end of the year.

Already causing heartburn is the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which has been before the Senate for almost two years, without even a hearing having been held on it. An irritated Lott asserted, in response to questioning from Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.), that, because of problems with Russia, and fears of Iranian and North Korean acquisition of nuclear weapons, the difficulty with the treaty is that it is "unilateral nuclear disarmament." He also tied action on the treaty to changes on the ABM Treaty and ratification of the Kyoto climate change treaty, to which Dorgan took exception. Lott did assure Dorgan, however, that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee would hold hearings on the CTBT at some point in the near future.

## **A**ppropriations for D.C. head toward veto

On Sept. 9, the House passed the conference report on the District of Columbia appropriations bill, which provides a \$429-million federal payment to the District and approves its \$6.8-billion budget with changes to the city's tax code. However, the bill passed by a razor-thin margin of 208 to 206, and faces a veto threat from the White House—not over amounts appropriated in the bill, on which no one disagrees, but over legislative riders attached to the bill which would change D.C. law. D.C. Appropriations subcommittee chairman Ernest Istook

(R-Okla.) explained that the Constitution gives Congress the right to ensure that the laws of the District of Columbia "stay in tune with the laws of the United States" regarding drug legalization and other issues.

Democrats took exception to Istook's view, especially D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton. She had urged her colleagues to support the original bill in July, but changed her mind when the conference report came out. "The bill has grown worse in conference," she said, "as the Senate simply piled on with unrelated additions, and the House made no improvements and kept no promises." Representative James Moran (D-Va.) added: "We would not impose the kinds of restrictions on any of our local jurisdictions that are imposed on the District of Columbia." These include barring the District from counting the votes in a 1996 referendum on drug legalization, and blocking a needle exchange program.

Istook reacted by accusing Moran of wanting to legalize drugs, which the latter did not deny. Under Moran's rationale, Istook argued, "It would be fine if the District legalized anything whatsoever, disregarding the laws of the country, disregarding the Constitution. If you legalize marijuana, what is next? Cocaine? Heroin? Where do you draw the line?"

## **S**pending bills sputter along

A flurry of activity in the first few days after Congress's return from the summer recess lent an illusion of progress to the appropriations process. However, so many obstacles stand in the way of final passage of several of the 13 bills that even GOP leaders have conceded that, at the very least, one

or more continuing resolutions will be needed to keep parts of the government from shutting down after the fiscal year ends Sept. 30.

Two bills are facing filibusters in the Senate, both from California Democrats. The Interior Department bill is being held up by Barbara Boxer, who objects to an amendment sponsored by Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Tex.) that would extend a moratorium on the collection of royalties on oil and gas drawn from federal lands. A cloture vote on Sept. 13 failed, 55 to 40. The transportation appropriations bill is being held up by Boxer's fellow California Democrat, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, on behalf of California and New York. Both of those states object to a provision sponsored by Richard Shelby (R-Ala.) that would place a 12.5% cap on the distribution of federal transit funds to any one state. Only California and New York would be affected; Feinstein says the provision would cost New York \$160 million and California \$117 million.

Besides the D.C. appropriations bill (see below), the House managed to pass the Veterans Affairs/Housing and Urban Development and Independent Agencies bill on Sept. 9, but that faces a veto threat. The bill increases veterans' medical care by \$1.7 billion over 1998, but cuts housing programs and the NASA budget by about \$1 billion each. Both cuts are opposed by the administration.

Four other appropriations bills went into conference during the week, those for the Commerce, Justice, and State Departments and the Judiciary; for Agriculture; for Defense; and for Energy and Water Development. Only two have been signed into law, the military construction bill and legislative branch appropriations. The Labor/Health and Human Services bill has yet to move out of subcommittee.