

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

GOP Debt Plan Passes House Committee

On Sept. 18, by a vote of 381-3, the House passed a bill to create a "Public Debt Payment Account" at the Treasury Department. The bill would require that \$42 billion from the fiscal year 2001 budget surplus be immediately deposited into that account. The bill also prohibits the House or Senate from considering any legislation that would reduce the expected surpluses in the Medicare or Social Security trust funds. The House action came four days after the bill was unanimously reported out by the House Ways and Means Committee.

Democrats consider the bill a gimmick, even though few voted against it. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.) told the House that the Republicans have been reading the polls, and have figured out that "the American people do not want tax breaks for the wealthy few. What they want is to pay down the national debt." He pointed out that no separate legislation is needed to pay down the debt, because the Treasury automatically takes any money left over at the end of the fiscal year and applies it to debt reduction.

Congressional Republicans, Democrats say, are abandoning Presidential candidate George W. Bush's \$1.3 trillion tax cut plan, because there isn't enough money to both cut taxes and reduce the debt. During an appearance on CBS's Face the Nation, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) claimed that the two plans are completely compatible. He explained that the debt reduction plan is only for one year, and that the remaining 10% of the surplus can be used for small business tax cuts. Bush's tax cut plan, however, is for ten years and wouldn't kick in until fiscal year 2002.

The vote comes in the aftermath of the House's failure to override Presi-

dent Clinton's vetoes of both the estate tax repeal and the marriage penalty tax repeal. The vote on the marriage penalty bill was 270-158 on Sept. 13, and that on the estate tax repeal was 274-157 on Sept. 7. The veto on the estate tax repeal was sustained when about a dozen Democrats who had originally voted for the bill changed their votes.

China Trade Bill Passed by Senate

After two and one-half weeks of debate, the Senate voted 83-15 on Sept. 19 to grant permanent normal trade relations to China. Even more importantly, the Senate rejected every attempt to amend the bill, so that the vote on passage clears the bill for President Clinton's signature without the need to negotiate a compromise version with the House. Clinton hailed the vote, declaring that it's about more than trade. "It's about building a world in which more human beings have more freedom," he said. "The more China opens its markets to our products, the wider it opens its doors to economic freedom and the more fully it will liberate the potential of its people."

The Senate debate, though lengthy, was far less divisive than the debate on the same bill in the House, in May. One feature of the debate was an unusual alliance in opposition to the bill between liberal Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) and the ultraconservative chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jesse Helms (R-N.C.). While they didn't co-sponsor any amendments, they each voted for the other's amendments.

There was tremendous pressure on the Senate not to amend the bill, especially from business and trade groups supporting the measure, because any

amendment was seen as potential death for the bill, at least for this year. The amendment that was considered the biggest threat, that sponsored by Robert Toricelli (D-N.J.) and Fred Thompson (R-Tenn.), to provide for sanctions for weapons proliferation, was tabled on Sept. 13 by a vote of 65-32. Of the 20 amendments that were voted on, only one, a sense of the Congress resolution on forced abortions, received more than 33 votes. That bill, sponsored by Helms, was defeated by a vote of 53-43.

House Votes Up Two More Spending Bills

On Sept. 14, the House ignored White House veto threats and voted up two more spending bills according to the dictates of the GOP leadership. Both bills passed by near-party-line votes. The District of Columbia Appropriations bill passed by a vote of 217-207, and the vote on the Legislative Branch Appropriations conference report was 212-209.

The bill that funds the Legislative Branch usually isn't a source of controversy, although in 1995 President Clinton vetoed it because of his displeasure over how the GOP-controlled Congress was handling the appropriations process as a whole. This year, however, the \$2.53 billion bill has a new twist. Somewhere during the conference process, the Treasury, Postal Service, and General Government Appropriations bill was attached to the Legislative Branch bill, even though the Senate never acted on its version of that bill. David Obey (D-Wisc.) called the bill "part of an unfortunate process" by which the GOP leadership has apparently decided "to send bills down to the President which will be veto bait

rather than bills that will be likely to become law.”

Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.) claimed that the Democrats were invited to participate in the process every step of the way, but had so far declined. He complained that the White House has failed to communicate its position on the Treasury bill. This is the reason, he said, that the Congress failed to move earlier on the bill. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), a member of the Legislative Branch Appropriations subcommittee, responded that the Treasury bill is not part of any conference he was invited to participate in.

President Clinton hasn't yet threatened to veto the D.C. bill, which includes a \$414 million Federal payment to the city and dictates the rest of the city budget, but the bill carries riders that have drawn vetoes in past years. These provisions include prohibitions on the use of funds for abortions except in limited circumstances, for implementing the District's Domestic Partners Act, and for needle-exchange programs for drug addicts.

Senate Panel Questions U.S. Policy on Iraq

On Sept. 19, three members of the Clinton Administration, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Walter Slocombe, Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Edward Walker, Jr., and recently appointed Central Command commander Gen. Tommy Franks, appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee to explain where policy toward Iraq stands.

Committee Chairman John Warner (R-Va.) focussed, in part, on the costs and dangers relating to U.S. military activities in enforcing the “no-fly zones” and the UN embargo. He com-

plained that the United States and Britain are the only countries militarily enforcing the UN resolutions, and demanded to know why France, Russia, and China have abstained from support for the new inspections Resolution 1284. He also wanted to know why the United States had support for its policy in the Balkans, but no support for the Iraq policy. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.) said that the Administration's policy toward Iraq has been a total failure, and he looks forward to hearings which will be held later in the month on a more innovative policy.

Carl Levin (D-Mich.), the committee's ranking Democrat, said that Saddam Hussein is increasing his hostility, and demanded to know what would be done about it. He asked whether Iraq's refusal to submit to Resolution 1284 and allow in inspectors, would be cause for military action.

Slocombe and the other Administration spokesmen said that only if Iraq crossed the three “red lines”—threatening its neighbors, rebuilding weapons of mass destruction, or violating the “no-fly” zone—would military action be taken. Walker, when asked whether there was a military option to force the UN inspection commission, chaired by Hans Blix, to be allowed in, said that it was now being reviewed, but that the purpose of Resolution 1284 is not to militarily force acceptance of inspectors. Walker said that the sanctions would be suspended if Iraq complied with weapons inspections, but that the chances for achieving our “objectives” are small with this regime, that even if the Iraqis complied, the regime would still need to be changed. When asked if Blix's mission was at a stalemate, Walker said that Blix won't go in without Saddam Hussein's acceptance, and implied that Saddam would eventually give in,

as he did with the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM).

Clinton Urges GOP on Patients Bill of Rights

President Clinton, appearing before reporters on Sept. 14 with leaders of the American Medical Association, took the Senate GOP leadership to task for failing to bring the Patients Bill of Rights to the floor for a vote. He said that he was confident that the votes are now there in the Senate to pass a bill very similar to that passed in the House last year, “if we can get it up for a vote.”

Clinton complained that it's only a minority in the Senate that's holding up the bill with threats to filibuster it. He said that no more debate is needed, and that “it's time to listen to the doctors, the nurses, the patients, the other consumer and provider experts.” He said that either the Senate leadership has to be persuaded to bring the bill to the floor, or nine or ten more votes are needed to make a filibuster-proof majority.

Meanwhile, Reps. John Dingell (D-Mich.) and Charles Norwood (R-Ga.), the co-sponsors of the House-passed bill, have been redrafting their bill in order to reach a compromise with Senate Republicans. However, their latest version has come under attack by the Association of Private Pension and Welfare Plans, for allegedly making lawsuits even easier than did the original bill. Norwood and Dingell said that they are trying to make a distinction between employers who participate in treatment decisions and those who don't, but the APPWP's analysis claims that such a distinction would be ineffective because of the difficulties associated with proving “direct participation.”