

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Democrats Criticize War, Defense Budget

On Feb. 27, Congressional Democrats signalled that President George Bush's war on terrorism and his missile defense program were no longer off-limits to criticism in this election year. In two separate hearings, Democrats attacked the Bush Administration's spending plans.

In a Senate Defense Appropriations subcommittee hearing, Democrats went after the open-ended nature of the war, the lack of an exit strategy, and the failure to capture Osama bin Laden and others. Appropriations Committee Chairman Robert Byrd (D-W.V.) asked Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, "How long can we afford this? . . . When will we know we have achieved victory?" He said that the Pentagon has sent him documents estimating that the war will cost \$30 billion in this fiscal year, suggesting that the supplemental appropriation that the Department of Defense is expected to ask for in March, will be at least \$12.6 billion. Sen. Ernest Hollings (D-S.C.) said that the Bush Administration seems to be arguing, "Since we've got a war, we've got to have deficits, and the war is never going to end."

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), speaking to reporters on Feb. 28, backed Byrd's remarks, and added that while the success in the war up until now cannot be overstated, "the jury's still out on future success." He warned that "there is expansion without clear direction." Republicans reacted to Daschle's remarks immediately. Senate Minority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) said, "How dare Senator Daschle criticize President Bush while we are fighting our war on terrorism, especially when we have troops in the field. He should not be trying to divide our country while we are

united." House Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) called Daschle's remarks "disgusting." Daschle called the GOP reaction "nothing short of hysterical" and stood by his remarks.

On the House side, in a joint hearing of the Military Procurement and Research and Development Subcommittees of the Armed Services Committee on Feb. 28, Democrats raised similar questions with regard to missile defense. Marty Meehan (D-Mass.) said that the recently reorganized Missile Defense Agency will be operating "with essentially no oversight, no accountability, and a budget that's growing by leaps and bounds." He ridiculed the so-called "spiral acquisition" strategy, whereby militarily useful technologies are fielded as soon as they are available, as last being used by the former Soviet Union, "and the result of that was national bankruptcy and a field full of barely functional weapons." Gene Taylor (D-Miss.) said that the increases in the missile defense budget come out of other areas of the defense budget, and pointed to aging transport aircraft and Army helicopters, many averaging 30 years old, to illustrate what that means. John Spratt (D-S.C.) told the *Washington Post* after the hearing, that it is likely that Democrats will mount floor challenges to the spending plan in committee and on the House floor.

Gephardt Challenges GOP on Social Security

On Feb. 28, House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) called on Republicans to bring their Social Security privatization schemes to the House floor for debate before the November election. He ridiculed the House GOP leadership for planning to bring up a bill that calls for the govern-

ment to send certificates, at a cost of \$10-12 million, to people over the age of 62, telling them that their benefits will never be cut. He called on Republicans instead to "get to the real matter," and bring up their privatization bill. He vowed that if they fail to bring it up, he intends to mount a discharge petition drive "so that we have that fair and full debate" on the House floor.

Gephardt said, "A year ago, we were talking about surpluses and paying down the back debt and using that to stabilize and strengthen Social Security." Instead, with the Bush economic plan, "we've got deficits as far as the eye can see."

Bush's proposal would introduce personal savings accounts that would be invested in the private financial markets. He included a pension reform proposal that would loosen the control that firms have over their employees' retirement plans.

Leahy, Grassley Offer Bill To Reform the FBI

On Feb. 28, Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Pat Leahy (D-Vt.) teamed with Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) to introduce a bill aimed at reforming the FBI. While describing the FBI as an "outstanding" law enforcement agency, Leahy told the Senate, "We must face the mistakes of the past, and make the changes needed to ensure that they are not repeated." Some of the incidents he listed included Waco, Ruby Ridge, the FBI lab scandal, the targeting of Wen Ho Lee, and the belated production of documents relating to the Oklahoma City bombing. "Until the bureau's problems are resolved and new challenges overcome," Leahy said, "we have to take a hands-on approach."

The bill would strengthen FBI

oversight. It creates a statutory jurisdiction for the Department of Justice Inspector General to investigate allegations of FBI misconduct. It provides whistle-blower protection for FBI employees and eliminates statutory disparities in disciplinary penalties for senior executive and non-executive personnel. The bill also establishes a career security program within the FBI, a polygraph program for screening personnel in sensitive positions, and provides statutory authority for the FBI police, all aimed at improving security within FBI facilities.

Grassley told reporters, "The FBI has bred a culture that rewards image over product. Top management has sent a message with its own actions, that careers are made on the publicity of very high-profile cases." He said the goal of the legislation "is to contribute significantly to a new way of doing business, where the FBI's top management rewards what FBI agents do best, and that is seeking the truth and let the truth convict." Were Grassley being honest, he could have pointed to a number of examples that he himself has investigated, including the scandal at the FBI crime lab, or other cases, such as the decades-long *Frühmenschen* program targetting black elected officials, or the FBI's targetting of *EIR* Founder Lyndon LaRouche, to show that the FBI has hardly been interested in seeking truth.

Bush Proposes New Welfare Reform Regime

On Feb. 26, President George Bush unveiled his proposal for re-authorization of the 1996 welfare reform law, at St. Luke's Catholic Church, in Washington, D.C. The 1996 law expires this year, and the debate on what to replace

it with is only just getting under way.

Bush's plan calls for spending \$17 billion a year on welfare programs over the next five years, all of it to be provided to the states in the form of block grants. The plan includes stricter work requirements, and a package of marriage promotion schemes. Under current law, 50% of welfare recipients are required to work in order to qualify for assistance, and Bush is proposing to increase this to 70% by 2007. "Our plan," Bush said, "will allow states to combine work with up to two days each week of education and job training." Marriage promotion is based on the premise that most welfare recipients are single mothers, but critics say that nobody really knows what works. Bush's plan also includes money for abstinence education programs.

A group of so-called centrist Democrats, led by Democratic Leadership Council Chairman Evan Bayh (D-Ind.), have endorsed much of Bush's plan in principle. Their plan would place more emphasis on providing child care, and on anti-poverty and family issues.

Another issue Democrats are raising is assistance to legal immigrants. Benjamin Cardin (D-Md.) is leading a push to lift the 1996 bans, whereas Bush is proposing to maintain the entire ban except for food stamps. Under Bush's plan, legal immigrants would be eligible for food stamps after five years, though even some House Republicans oppose this.

Debt Ceiling Increase Demanded by White House

On Feb. 27, President George Bush said that he told Congressional leaders, during a breakfast meeting that morning, "do not play politics with the

debt ceiling, that we're at war, we've got troops all around the world, we've got men and women whose lives are at risk, and now is not the time to be playing politics and using the debt ceiling as an excuse for some individual's cause." The Bush Administration has requested an increase in the debt ceiling from the current \$5.95 trillion to \$6.7 trillion, an increase of \$750 billion, or 12.5%. The Treasury Department is warning that if the increase is not granted, the government could run out of borrowing authority by the end of March.

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) expects the House to act on a clean debt limit bill, that is, without any extraneous legislation attached to it. He said that at the White House meeting, "We all agreed that keeping a clean debt limit bill is something that would be in everyone's best interest."

However, this is an election year. Democrats are expected to point out that President Bush is asking for the first debt limit increase in four years, after four years of budget surpluses. That argument is making some House Republicans nervous about being accused of fiscal irresponsibility. House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas told Associated Press that he may call on Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill to take the same steps that Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin took in 1995 when President Bill Clinton vetoed a bill that included a debt limit increase. Rubin shifted money from civil service retirement funds in order to keep the government from defaulting. Thomas said, "Maybe O'Neill ought to look at it and see if it's something he could adopt." Ironically, the GOP accused Rubin, at the time, of possible constitutional violations in his effort to keep the government functioning.