

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

No Resolution in Sight, As Budget Fights Drag On

Last year, when the Fiscal 2003 appropriations process went into limbo, the Republicans in both Houses had then-Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) to blame for not passing a budget resolution in the Senate, even though the House GOP leadership made a decision not to proceed with the process under those circumstances. This year, the House GOP controls both Houses as well as the White House, and yet, four weeks into Fiscal 2004, has managed to pass only three of the 13 annual spending bills. Now, there is talk of wrapping up the process with yet another omnibus funding bill, as has apparently become the rule rather than the exception, since the GOP took control of the House in 1995.

The possibility of an omnibus bill emerged on Oct. 21, when the House passed another continuing resolution, extending the previous one to Nov. 7. Rep. David Obey (D-Wisc.), the ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, told the House that the continuing resolution was to become the vehicle, in the Senate, for an omnibus bill. He expressed skepticism, however, that it will be finished by the Nov. 7 deadline. He said that he expected to see another resolution with a date somewhere between Nov. 15 and Thanksgiving, but that the process will probably still not be done by that time. "I am afraid," he said, "that it is beginning to look a lot like Christmas."

While the House has finished initial work on all 13 of its bills, the Senate has only completed seven, the excuse being that the \$87 billion Iraq War Supplemental diverted attention from the regular bills. The Transportation/Treasury bill was one of the seven and the Senate completed work on it on Oct. 24. The \$1.34 billion appropriation for Amtrak in the Senate bill sets up a fight with the House, which only

included \$900 million in its bill—a level that Amtrak President David Gunn has warned will result in the shutdown of the national passenger railroad.

Byrd: Make Iraq Overseer Accountable to Senate

On Oct. 27, Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) challenged the Senate to hold the Bush Administration accountable for its war in Iraq. Specifically, he introduced an amendment to the Fiscal 2004 foreign operations appropriations bill to make the head of the Iraq Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) a Presidential nominee subject to confirmation by the Senate. He told the Senate that the House has already put such a provision into its version of the \$87 billion Iraq War Supplemental bill, in reaction to the news that President Bush had appointed National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice to lead a task force that would assume the responsibility for rebuilding Iraq. He noted that the National Security Advisor traditionally does not testify before Congressional committees, except under extraordinary circumstances. "It is an unconfirmed position," he said, "and its actions are hidden from the view of the Congress, the media, and the public."

Likewise for the head of the CPA, Amb. Paul Bremer; Byrd has little confidence that Bremer will testify in front of Congress when he is not asking for money. "The Congress has a responsibility on behalf of the American people," said Byrd, "to ensure that whoever is running things in Iraq is answerable to the Congress and to the American people." Byrd pointed out that the CPA "is an entity that has not been sanctioned, which has not been approved by Congress. . . . It is operating without any mandate from the American public. Yet it claims to be

vested by the President with all executive, legislative, and judicial authority necessary to achieve its objective."

As he has previously, Byrd contrasted the Bush Administration's Iraq policy with the post-World War II Marshall Plan. He noted that the Marshall Plan was only passed after seven weeks of public hearings, and the Congress specified that the head of the plan would be subject to Senate confirmation. "On the other hand," he said, "the Coalition Provisional Authority and its administrator can claim none of that."

A majority in the Senate was unwilling to back Byrd up, however, and his amendment was defeated by a vote of 44-53 on Oct. 28.

Will Bush Veto Increase For Veterans' Health Care?

On Oct. 21, the House voted 277-139, in a nonbinding motion, to support an extra \$1.3 billion for veterans' health care included in the Senate version of the \$87 billion Iraq War Supplemental appropriations bill. The extra funding would eliminate the \$250 deductible that some veterans are paying to use Veterans Administration hospitals, as well as allow them to get prescription drugs at lower rates. The motion also called for the House negotiators to support the Senate provision converting \$10 billion of the \$20 billion Iraq reconstruction aid into loans.

Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.), who was a co-sponsor of the Senate amendment, told reporters on Oct. 22, "Our veterans need to know that America is with them and that we owe them a debt of gratitude. But gratitude should just not only be with words and parades; it's got to be with deeds and resources," including health care. She complained that the Bush Administration had the gall to object to the additional money.