

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Budget Reconciliation on The Move, But To Where?

The Senate began debate on its fiscal 2006 budget reconciliation package on Oct. 31, a bill that demands \$39 billion in spending cuts from mandatory programs over the next five years. By all accounts, the relevant committee chairmen had to perform all kinds of balancing acts in order to get the minimum 51 votes for passage. The Democrats have simply been denouncing the plan.

As Democrats have been pointing out, the spending-cuts plan is only half of the package. The other half is the \$70 billion in tax cuts demanded in the budget resolution passed last Spring. The net effect on the budget deficit, therefore, is to increase it by \$31 billion, making a mockery out of the neo-conservatives' claim that the cuts are needed to offset Hurricane Katrina spending.

The process in the House has been riven by factionalization and fragmentation, between neo-conservatives demanding austerity, and moderate Republicans worried about the consequences of cutting social programs. Under pressure from the neo-conservatives, led by Republican Study Committee chairman Mike Pence (R-Ind.), House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) came up with a plan to amend the budget resolution to require \$50 billion in spending cuts, rather than the \$35 billion it originally called for. Not only did this proposal cause consternation among some elements of the Republican caucus, but also Senate leaders indicated they would not even consider it. The House GOP, under Acting Majority Leader Roy Blunt (R-Mo.), instructed committee chairmen to come up with an additional \$15 billion in cuts, which they completed by Oct. 31.

The draconian nature of the cuts

was exemplified by the action of the House Agriculture Committee to cut \$844 million out of the Food Stamp program, primarily by changing eligibility rules so as to cut off 300,000 people from the program. As Democrats pointed out, the committee acted just as the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a study reporting that the percentage of food-insecure households in the United States, that is, households where family members went hungry at some point during the year, increased from 11.2% of all households in 2003 to 11.9% in 2004.

The Senate bill is less draconian, and the House bill does not even have certainty of passing a House vote. The GOP leadership has already delayed a vote on the \$50 billion plan once, and Blunt said on Oct. 18 that the leadership would not take a bill to the floor without being assured of 218 votes.

House Upholds Base Closure Recommendations

The defense base closure and realignment (BRAC) process that generated much anxiety and controversy last Summer, ended anticlimactically on Oct. 27, when the House of Representatives rejected a resolution disapproving the final recommendations by a vote of 324 to 85. The debate on the resolution, which had been introduced by Ray LaHood (R-Ill.), reflected more a resigned acceptance of a process that could not be defeated, rather than any unqualified endorsement of the proposed base closures.

Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, proclaimed himself a supporter of BRAC, but said that in the 2005 round "neither the Department of Defense nor the BRAC Commission has lived up to the high stan-

dards that we set for them." The end result, he said, "is that I doubt we will see another round of base closures due to the missteps along the way."

Joel Hefley (R-Colo.), who several times over the past few years had sponsored amendments to delay the BRAC round, told the House, "We lost the battle. . . . We should just proceed with it at this point." He added, however, "I have reached the conclusion that any future use of the existing BRAC laws to close or realign bases would be a mistake."

Clearly, the BRAC Commission's actions in rejecting some of the Pentagon's more controversial proposals, such as those to close the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Maine or Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota, deflated much of the opposition that had developed in the Congress during the Summer. With no action in the Senate to disapprove it, the BRAC Commission report is set to become law in early November.

Equipment Shortages Cripple National Guard

"We are going to bankrupt the National Guard at the rate we are going," House Government Reform Committee Chairman Tom Davis (R-Va.) warned during an Oct. 20 hearing on the role of the National Guard domestically and overseas. Two state governors, Dirk Kempthorne of Idaho and Ed Rendell of Pennsylvania, and the head of the Government Accountability Office (GAO), Comptroller General David Walker, provided testimony documenting the degree to which the National Guard is being taken down under the pressures of the war in Iraq.

Both governors testified that equipment shortages, which stem from the Army requirement that Guard

units leave their equipment behind when they redeploy back to the United States from Iraq, are having significant impact on their states' ability to respond to natural disasters. That equipment amounts to 64,000 pieces, worth \$1.2 billion, including vehicles, communications gear, and even helicopters, and the Army does not have a plan to replace that equipment after those Guard units return to the United States.

Walker reported that National Guard Bureau officials estimate that non-deployed Guard units have only 34% of their essential warfighting equipment, compared to 75% in 2001. "The significant use of Army National Guard forces for overseas and homeland missions since Sept. 11, 2001, has resulted in declining readiness, weakening the Army National Guard's preparedness for future missions," Walker said.

A panel of Defense Department, Army, and National Guard officials testified that the Pentagon has now developed a \$21 billion plan to re-equip and reorganize all of the Army National Guard's 34 combat brigades to 100% of their equipment requirements by 2012. Rep. Chris Shays (R-Conn.), who grilled the DoD witnesses on the plan, concluded that the plan is "encouraging," but that nothing has yet been resolved.

Funds Pulled for Nuclear Bunker-Buster Bomb

Pete Domenici (R-N.M.), the chairman of the Senate Energy and Water Development Appropriations Subcommittee, indicated on Oct. 26, that conferees on the fiscal 2006 energy and water development appropriations bill have agreed not to include funding for the so-called nuclear bunker-buster bomb. Domenici said that the

\$4 million to study the feasibility of such weapons was dropped at the request of the Bush Administration. Domenici told *Congressional Quarterly* that Energy Department officials had "indicated that this research should evolve around more conventional weapons, rather than tactical nuclear devices."

The apparent reason for the Administration request was the intransigent opposition to the proposal among Democrats and a handful of Republicans, including House Energy and Water Development Appropriations Subcommittee chairman David Hobson (R-Ohio), who for years has refused to include the funding in his bill. "We cannot advocate for nuclear non-proliferation around the globe and pursue more nuclear weapons options here at home," he had said in a speech to the National Academy of Sciences in August 2004.

Last May, the House Armed Services Committee had redefined the program so that it could go ahead only as a conventional weapon by taking it out of the Energy Department, which can only conduct tests for nuclear weapons, and putting it into the Defense Department. This action followed a study by the National Academy of Sciences which found that the collateral damage caused by such a weapon exploding underground would be as severe as a surface blast.

Hearing Highlights Iraq 'Reconstruction Gap'

On Oct. 18, the National Security Subcommittee of the House Government Reform Committee, chaired by Chris Shays (R-Conn.), held a hearing on the differences between what the Bush Administration has promised for Iraq, and what has actually been, and is likely to be, delivered. This is what

Stuart W. Bowen, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, terms the "reconstruction gap." Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), the ranking Democrat on the full committee, noted Bowen's terminology and declared that after two and a half years and billions of dollars, the Bush Administration's efforts to rebuild Iraq are failing.

Waxman reported that after spending over \$2 billion, Iraqi oil production is still below what it was before the U.S. invasion. For electricity, the United States promised to increase peak output to 6,000 megawatts, but output remains at about 4,600 MW, despite over \$4 billion spent on the electricity sector. "In fact," Waxman said, "embassy officials in Baghdad told our staffs in August that 'we'll never meet demand.'" In the water sector, the Bush Administration had promised that 90% of Iraqis would have access to fresh water, but after spending over a billion dollars, one-third of Iraqis lack access to fresh, running water. Bowen agreed with Waxman that "we haven't reached our original goals."

Alongside Bowen at the witness table were the inspectors general for the Pentagon, the State Department, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); the Army Auditor General; and Joseph A. Christoff, the director of international affairs and trade at the GAO. Christoff noted that the situation is probably worse than Waxman reported, because there are no means for measuring what people receive, in terms of water and electricity, as opposed to knowing what is produced. Losses within the delivery system are completely unknown. Remarkably, Shays did not limit the Democrats to the usual five minutes for questions of the witnesses, but let each one question in depth for more than 10 minutes.