

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Estate Tax Reduction Blocked in Senate

On the evening of Aug. 3, Senate Democrats blocked consideration of the so-called "Trifecta" bill, that combines a permanent reduction in the estate tax, extension of a series of expiring tax benefits, and an increase in the minimum wage from \$5.15 to 7.25 per hour. House Republicans had combined the three elements into a single package, and rammed the bill through in the dead of night, hoping that Senate Democrats would have to swallow the estate tax provision in order to get the wage increase through. All but four Democrats voted against cloture, with two Republicans joining them to block consideration of the bill on a 56 to 42 vote. Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) then changed his "yes" vote to a "no," so that he would still have the option of bringing the bill up again at a later point.

Frist told the Senate, on the morning preceding the vote, that the three components would be considered as one package, and charged that the Democrats didn't consider them as "matters of importance" to the American people. Frist also threatened that the bill was the last chance in the 109th Congress to give minimum-wage workers a boost.

Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) dismissed the entire Republican ploy as a "shell game," pointing out that the GOP's cynically named "American Family Prosperity Act," would bring prosperity to only the richest 8,100 families in America. He criticized the Senate leadership for spending so much time on the estate tax, when the Senate should be addressing other urgent issues, such as the degradation of the U.S. military as a result of the Bush Administration wars. The "Trifecta" bill should instead be called the "Defecta." "We

know the Republicans hate the minimum wage," Reid declared, and noted that even billionaire Warren Buffett is against the repeal of the estate tax.

Bolton Nomination Comes Up Again for UN Post

John Bolton appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee July 27, in a renewed attempt by the White House to have him permanently confirmed as U.S. Ambassador to the UN. Bolton, a darling of the neo-con war faction, was given the post as a recess appointment, which will expire in January, since it was clear at the time that there was significant opposition to his appointment. Although most of the Democrats on the committee expressed continuing opposition to his confirmation, it was not clear from the hearing whether they would filibuster to stop it.

Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.), the ranking member on the committee, grilled Bolton on his effectiveness as a diplomat: "My concern is that at the moment of the greatest need for diplomacy in our recent history, we are not particularly effective at it," Biden said. Biden also has said Bolton should not get a confirmation vote until the White House turns over documents he requested when Bolton was nominated last year.

The only Republican who expressed skepticism about the nomination was Lincoln Chafee (R-R.I.), who demanded that Bolton define the root causes of terrorism in the Middle East, which Bolton failed to do to his satisfaction. Chafee also asked Bolton whether or not U.S. policy in the Middle East includes a "viable, contiguous Palestinian state." After Bolton offered the usual Administration platitudes about support for establishing a

Palestinian state, Chafee retorted, "I might disagree on the effort behind the rhetoric," and was clearly frustrated with the non-answers he got from Bolton on what the Administration has in mind for the Middle East.

The outlook for Bolton seemed to improve significantly, when Sen. George Voinovich (R-Ohio), who had opposed Bolton last year, announced, in an op-ed in the July 20 *Washington Post*, that he now supports him. However, Voinovich's about-face may be offset by Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), who said on July 28, in response to a question, that "I have not decided, if Mr. Bolton comes up for a vote, how I will vote." Committee chairman Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) has put off a vote until September.

Democrats Finally Get Together on Iraq Policy

The Democratic leadership of the House and the Senate signed a letter to President Bush, on July 31, calling for an end to the Administration's policy of "staying the course" in Iraq. They note that there has been no diplomatic effort to resolve sectarian differences, no regional effort to establish a broader security framework, and no attempt to revive a struggling reconstruction effort. Instead, the Bush Administration is planning to redeploy 5,000 U.S. troops into Baghdad. "Far from implementing a comprehensive 'Strategy for Victory' as you promised months ago," they write, "your Administration's strategy appears to be one of trying to avoid defeat."

Instead, the Democrats call for a new policy, based on the amendment to last year's defense authorization bill, declaring 2006 to be a year of "significant transition to full sovereignty, with Iraqi security forces taking the

lead for the security of a free and sovereign Iraq, thereby creating the conditions for the phased redeployment of United States forces from Iraq.” They say that such a redeployment should begin this year. They also call for taking steps toward a political settlement, including “amending the [Iraqi] constitution to achieve a fair sharing of power and resources,” and an international conference “to persuade other governments to be involved, and to secure the resources necessary to finance Iraq’s reconstruction.”

The letter was signed by Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid (Nev.), House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.), Senate Democratic Whip Richard Durbin (Ill.), House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer (Md.), and the ranking members of the Armed Services Committees, Foreign Relations Committees, Intelligence Committees, and Defense Appropriations Subcommittees.

Hagel Quotes FDR vs. Bush Policy in Mideast

On July 28, Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) delivered a speech at the Brookings Institution, warning, among other things, that “the world’s trust and confidence in America’s purpose has seriously eroded. America is increasingly seen not as the well-spring of consensus that for decades helped create alliances and coalitions grounded in common objectives and common interests.” He further warned that it would be an “irresponsible and dangerous false choice” to defend Israel “at the expense of our Arab and Muslim relationships.” He warned that neither the United States nor Israel can allow itself to become isolated in the Middle East. “That would marginalize America’s global leadership, trust,

and influence, further isolate Israel, and prove to be disastrous for both countries in the region.” He also argued that Hezbollah and Hamas cannot be defeated by military action alone. “Extended military action will tear apart Lebanon, destroy its economy and infrastructure, create a humanitarian disaster, further weaken Lebanon’s fragile democratic government, strengthen popular Muslim and Arab support for Hezbollah and deepen hatred for Israel.”

He concluded by quoting from Franklin Roosevelt’s Jan. 6, 1945 State of the Union message, wherein Roosevelt counselled, “We must not let those differences divide us and blind us to our more important common and continuing interests in winning the war and building the peace,” and that “International cooperation on which enduring peace must be based is not a one-way street.” And, “international cooperation and progress are not helped by any nation assuming that it has a monopoly of wisdom and virtue.”

Hagel’s remarks came a little over a week after the Senate approved, by a voice vote, a completely one-sided resolution supporting Israel’s actions in Lebanon; a similar resolution in the House was voted up 410 to 8.

Specter Deal on NSA Spying Comes Under Attack

Senate Judiciary Committee chairman Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) convened a hearing July 26, on a bill he has introduced under which the Bush Administration would submit its NSA domestic spying program to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court. The court would then make a determination as to whether or not the program is constitutional. Despite Specter’s

earlier outspoken opposition to the Administration’s domestic surveillance program, his new measure is justifiably being attacked by Democrats and by civil liberties and constitutional-rights organizations as a complete capitulation to the White House-backed bill.

At a Judiciary Committee markup on Aug. 3, Specter attempted to bring his bill to a vote, but was blocked by committee Democrats. Ranking member Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) said that a vote on the bill would be “premature,” since Congress is no further along in its understanding of the Administration’s domestic spying than it was months ago. And we don’t know what other domestic spying activities might be being conducted “behind Congress’s back, outside the law and without court approval.”

Leahy pointed out that when the committee tried to get testimony on the spying program from telephone company executives, Vice President Cheney blocked it. Since when does Congress have to get the Administration’s permission to conduct oversight?, Leahy asked, adding: “Last I checked our Constitution, this body was not part of the so-called ‘Unitary Executive.’” Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) called it “a sham proposal” whose purpose is “to codify the breathtakingly broad and erroneous view of executive power asserted by the Bush Administration and rejected by the Supreme Court.”

Two of the four non-governmental witnesses, Jim Dempsey of the Center for Democracy and Technology, and Mary DeRosa of CSIS, said that it would be better to have no bill at all, than Specter’s bill—which legalizes what the Administration has been doing illegally. “Your bill would endorse the radical concept of the imperial presidency,” Dempsey told Specter.