

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, January 23, 2007

11:35 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning.

Mr. Plotkin, welcome. I understand there was a press conference. We started a little late because I was advised that Speaker Pelosi and Leader Reid had a press conference from which you have just come, so I will be very brief. Whatever they said is what we are going to do. Thank you very much.

Q Do you know what they said?

Q You are buying us all lunch?

Mr. Hoyer. Is that what they said I was doing?

Q You are leading the protest tonight out of the Chamber.

Mr. Hoyer. That depends on the temperature.

The House will meet at 10:30 for legislative business. We will consider three bills under suspension. It will be a relatively short day, as you know, on these days that we have the State of the Union Address. It is necessary for them to secure the Chamber and do all the stuff that they have to do.

We will have a vote on the Congressional Pension Accountability Act. You might expect an overwhelming vote for that. That was going to happen last night. As you know, there was a lot of snow out West, and Gabby Giffords sat on a plane for 11 hours yesterday, among others

on both sides of the aisle, so that is why we are doing it today.

We will have some suspensions of the State of the Union at 9:00 o'clock.

Tomorrow, we will consider the provision to amend the rules to allow the Resident Commissioner and the Delegates to vote in the Committee of the Whole. You may have some questions on that. I expect that to be contentious.

As you know, that was the rule in the 1993-1994 years under the Democrats. I was a very strong proponent of that. David Bonior and I supported that, and I have introduced it. It was a possibility for consideration when we offered the rules package initially, but we made a determination to offer it separately, but it is offered early so that the Delegates will at least have that vote. You may have questions on it, and I will recognize Mr. Plotkin. I am sure he has a question on it and observations on it.

We will get out early because the Republican retreat commences and they are leaving. I talked to Mr. Boehner, so we are going to try to get out by 1:00 o'clock. Mr. Blunt and Mr. Boehner both requested that. As you know, our retreat is the following week, but we are not leaving until Thursday morning. So next Wednesday does not need to be a short day, but this Wednesday needs to be a relatively short day.

As for the State of the Union Address tonight, I know that Mr. Webb was also in that press conference. As I understand it, he will be giving the Democratic response. I am sure they have previewed that or at least the perspective. 57 percent of Americans in the poll that was out today by ABC and the Washington Post want Democrats to set the agenda. 29 percent want the President to set the agenda. I think that is a continuation of the sentiment that was expressed on November 7th. They want the country to move in a new direction.

Very frankly, we now see in Iraq, which was one of the major issues in the election, that it continues to be one of the major issues, a perception by the American public that the President is not setting a new direction, that he is not moving the country in a new direction. As you saw yesterday, Mr. Warner, Ms. Collins, Mr. Nelson, and the fourth -- I forget right off the top of my head --

Q Coleman.

Mr. Hoyer. -- Coleman of Minnesota have suggested an alternative, but it not really an alternative to the Democratic proposal, which was suggested by Biden, et al, in that both propositions, the central theme of both propositions, is the same, that the increase, the escalation in troops, will not get us to where we want to get, and where we want to get of course is to the stabilization of

Iraq, and both the Republican resolution offered by Warner and the -- it is bipartisan. Ben Nelson is a part of that bipartisan proposal by Biden. Both have, in my opinion, the same thrust so that, although they are different sponsors, it is clear that they are stating the same premise and seeking the same objective.

Energy independence and global warming, I understand that is going to be a significant part of the President's speech tonight. I have not seen his speech tonight, but all of the publicity, free speech publicity, indicates that. As you know, our caucus believes that global warming is a very serious issue. Unlike the President, we have believed that for the last 6 years. The President has believed it -- I do not know how long -- but relatively briefly, and we will see what he has to offer on that.

As you know, Speaker Pelosi has indicated that we are going to seek to create a select committee which will not have legislative authority, which will not report legislation, but which will have the task of spending a lot of time over the next 5 months looking at alternatives that are available here and around the world to see whether or not we can create a consensus here for very substantial action in responding to what we believe is a crisis, global warming.

The budget, the President has indicated, and as I said

last week, he was going to shift the responsibility or try to place on us the responsibility for balancing the budget. We want to do that, but it will be very interesting to see how real the President is in his proposal. He has not made realistic proposals up until now. Mr. Bernanke had some comments about that the other day. Obviously, others have had comments on it. Mr. Walker of the GAO has said we have a critical situation confronting us, and we believe, as you know, in adopting PAYGO, that we have tried to take the first step towards encompassing the objective, and we will see how real the President is going to be. If he is really serious, we think he will endorse returning to PAYGO, which from 1990 through the 1990s, and reiterated in 1997 in a bipartisan way, was responsible for getting us to a balance.

Lastly, he is going to discuss education but also health care. Health care is obviously one of the biggest problems confronting the country. We have had a very substantial addition to the numbers of uninsured in America over the last 6 years. The Clinton administration obviously tried to address that issue early in its term and was not successful, but it is clear that we need to be successful because Americans need available, accessible, affordable health care, period. Our Nation needs to have citizens healthy, and we will see what the President offers.

He is again looking to the Tax Code. The problem with

looking into the Tax Code clearly is that there are an awful lot of uninsured Americans who, giving incentives to in the Tax Code, do not really help them get health care because the reason they do not have health care is they cannot afford it, and the reason they cannot afford it is because they are not making much money. So giving them a tax break is something that may be intellectually interesting to them but makes no difference in their lives. We will have to see specifically what he offers, but hopefully it is not more of the same.

Lastly, let me just say that, although we have a press conference on, obviously we are very pleased with our 100 hours, which however you count it, we made the 100 hours, 42-1/2 hours if you just count it on the bills, 86-plus hours if you count the time we were in session from start to finish. In any event, we were very, very pleased, particularly pleased with the overwhelming bipartisan support that these bills received. Not every one of them, obviously, had large votes, but on one of them, as you know, the Education bill had 124. The Minimum Wage had 82. We averaged 62 Republican votes. In the 124, as I think I pointed out to you, we got the majority of the majority -- in fact, unanimity -- and a majority of the minority. We think that is a very positive step. We hope to be able to continue to create an environment in which we can get,

perhaps not a majority of the minority, but substantial numbers of Republicans, and we are going to work with them both in committee and on the floor to accomplish that objective.

Q You did not mention another thing that I think President Bush is going to talk about tonight, and that is overhauling Social Security. Would you see Congress acting on that?

Mr. Hoyer. Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid are clearly very substantial challenges confronting us. As we talk about PAYGO, as we talk about responsible fiscal management of the Federal Government and of our country, you cannot talk about that without talking about Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. We are prepared to work with the President in a bipartisan way to accomplish the objective of stabilizing all three of those programs which are demographically challenging us in terms of work force and numbers. Clearly, dealing with the health care issue from the President's perspective on the uninsured, Medicare and Medicaid are going to play a role in that depending upon who has access, children's health care in particular.

So the answer to your question is I did not mention it, and I should have. They are very important issues. When he mentions these, we will hopefully not be put in the position

as we were on Social Security last year where he had an objective. To begin with, that objective was essentially rejected by a large number of almost every Democrat and rejected by a significant number of Republicans, but he never moved off of his proposal. If that is how he wants to proceed, we are not going to have much success.

On the other hand, I have had long discussions in my office, two to be exact, with Secretary Paulson, and I talked to him the other night at dinner, very briefly, but I believe he is somebody who wants to solve problems and knows that in order to solve problems we have to sit down at the table together and come to agreement on how those problems are being solved. Neither we nor they nor him -- the President -- can say, "this is what it is. Take it or leave it," because if that is what happens we will not make any progress. So we are prepared to sit down with him.

Q But President Bush has to take the private accounts off the table?

Mr. Hoyer. We think the private accounts do not fly. We think the American public has rejected that, yes. There are other ways to look at, however, expanding the income of Social Security. I think I mentioned one of these the other day. I mentioned to the President and to the White House personnel -- I forget specifically if other than the President said, if you think that this is going to grow

substantially the income of Social Security by putting it in private investments, then simply give the fiduciaries the authorization to do that in a collective sense. In other words, everybody takes the risk of winning or losing. You do not have big winners or big losers. That was not received very favorably, as you can tell, but there are other ways of doing it.

The Clinton administration talked about USA accounts, which would give, sort of like the Thrift Savings Account that Federal employees have, some Federal incentive for people to put a portion above their Social Security contribution into savings accounts which would be matched by the Federal Government in some way.

Q And Democrats are open to that?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q Mr. Hoyer, when do you intend to bring to the floor legislation creating the Selective Committee on Global Warming, and what do you think of Mr. Dingell's concerns about his committee and some others being kind of overridden by this?

Mr. Hoyer. I think that Speaker Pelosi -- first of all, on timing, I do not know the timing. Speaker Pelosi and I have not talked about timing. She made the suggestion, proposal, and she is pursuing it. She made it last Friday, I think, is when she announced it.

We have started this 100 hours, and it is almost as if, once something is said, it is done. There is a little time warp here, but I want to discuss that with her in terms of timing.

Secondly, Mr. Dingell's concern, which is shared by other committee chairs, the committees -- I had said on the floor last night Woodrow Wilson said, "The work of Congress is done on the committees." That is true. Speaker Pelosi has made it clear that this select committee will not have legislative responsibility. They will not be reporting out legislation. All legislation will go through the committees and be reported out by the committees.

What this select committee is going to do is, however, in a global sense, looking across jurisdictional lines, look at opportunities out there to address the global warming issue, which we believe is a very critical problem. Frankly, the President, obviously, is now coming to the conclusion it is a critical problem he has got to address, but we had a meeting with Mr. Dingell and other committee chairs this morning, as I do every Tuesday. We discussed his concerns and the fact that he is -- he, as a matter of fact, made the comment his intention is to work as assiduously as possible with his committee to come out with solutions, legislative alternatives, in the near term, in the June time frame. He said it is going to be tough, but

he is talking to the Speaker about it.

Q Do you think you will have trouble passing this legislation created in the committee, because Republican leaders say they are going to whip their folks to vote against it?

Mr. Hoyer. I do not want to speculate on that at this point in time because I think that we -- I want to talk to more people on our side to see whether we are going to have a problem on our side, and I think, frankly, that there are a lot of Republicans concerned about this issue who think that maybe looking at it in a broader sense -- I was going to say global -- but looking at global warming globally, which seems to make sense, might be appropriate as well. I, obviously, think the jurisdictional issues are real issues. Committees have responsibilities. They want to meet those responsibilities, and they do not want them done by others, and that is understandable, but I think we will work this out.

David.

Q Mr. Leader, on the vote for the Resident Commissioners and the Delegates, it is our understanding and my sources tell me she did not know about that, about the scheduling, that it was a surprise to her the way it was done, which leads me to my follow-up question.

Mr. Hoyer. Your sources are incorrect.

Q Okay. Good to know that.

My second and my follow-up question is: Is this consolation for her in lieu of getting a --

Mr. Hoyer. Oh, Norton you are talking about?

Q Norton.

Mr. Hoyer. I was not sure who "she" was. I thought you were talking about Speaker Pelosi and scheduling.

Q Yeah.

Mr. Hoyer. No. I had a meeting here with Mrs. Norton, and we discussed this. Mrs. Norton and I absolutely agree and make the representation this is not in any way a substitute replacement for or a delaying tactic of Mrs. Norton's having a full vote. As every other Member of Congress who represents full United States citizens, Americans, it is outrageous, undemocratic and inconsistent with American principles that the District of Columbia Representative does not have a full, complete vote in the House of Representatives. That has been my position since 1981, when I came to the Congress. It is my position today. We need to move this as quickly as possible. Are there other issues involved? As Mr. Plotkin knows, yes, there are, but both Speaker Pelosi and I are committed to moving this bill and moving it in the short term -- I do not have a date for you -- but moving it in the short term, and I feel passionately about this, as you can tell. It is absolutely

indefensible that Mrs. Norton does not have a full vote in the House of Representatives.

There are other issues -- statehood issues, Senate, all that sort of stuff. All that stuff you can argue.

Q The Electoral College?

Mr. Hoyer. The fact of the matter is she represents 675,000 --

Q 570,000.

Mr. Hoyer. 570,000 U.S. citizens, Americans, who could move across the street. If they live on one side of East Capitol Street and they move across to the Maryland side, they have full voting rights, but if they move across to the other side, they do not. That is indefensible.

Q Mr. Leader, can I follow up?

Mr. Hoyer. I you knew you would, Mark.

Q On Washington Post Radio, you did set a date. You volunteered a date. Let me remind you you said March. Do you think it is now not going to be March?

Mr. Hoyer. No, I did not say that.

Q I remember your saying March.

Mr. Hoyer. I may have said March. I am not saying it will not be March.

Q Oh, okay.

Mr. Hoyer. I am just saying I am not reiterating March at this time. What I said was --

Q You volunteered March.

Mr. Hoyer. Hear me. Hear me. I feel very strongly about this Delegate voting, too. Mr. Blunt, on the floor, said it was some sort of device to make the votes look bigger. That is not my objective. It was not my objective in 1993. It is not my objective. Let me tell you what my objective is.

There are five people who we have told you have an office, you have the same staff, the same MRA -- members' accounts -- the same perks; you have everything that a Member of Congress has except the opportunity to come to the floor and show your opinion on issues of importance to the American people.

Now, constitutionally, we cannot and should not -- I agree with that. States have votes. Now I think the District of Columbia, for purposes of that, is a State. It ought to be considered as a State. Puerto Rico, Americans Samoa, Guam, and the Virgin Islands are different entities, but I feel passionately as former chairman of the Helsinki Commission, when I went to Moscow and I went to Belgrade and I went to other places behind the Iron Curtain -- Belgrade was not behind the Iron Curtain. I understand that. The fact is that we should allow an opportunity in a democracy for people to express their opinions. We have given them everything else. I think we

ought to give them this. Now, constitutionally, as you know, the bill will provide -- the bill is exactly like the one that was in place in 1993 and 1994. It will allow -- require, in fact -- if their votes make a difference, we will immediately rise and revote without their having the ability to vote, but they will have expressed their opinion.

Now, as a practical matter, what does that do? It gives the incentive and opportunity for people to come to the floor, interface with their colleagues, talk to them about issues of concern to their constituencies. So that is why I think this is so important.

Q I just have a follow-up on the permanent D.C. vote.

The President, as you mentioned, is coming, surprisingly -- maybe not surprisingly -- to a Democratic retreat.

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q Tom Davis keeps on saying, if you get the bill, the D.C. permanent vote, through the House and the Senate, the President would not veto the bill.

Will you ask the President at your retreat whether he will sign that bill or veto the bill?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q Mr. Leader, I was wondering what happened --

Mr. Hoyer. At the end of the table.

Q About the budget, you have said that the President has been unrealistic --

Mr. Hoyer. By the way, remind me to ask the question so I do not disappoint Mr. Plotkin.

Q You said the President has been unrealistic in his budget assumptions in the past. He is likely to propose a balanced budget by 2012. It is likely to include a number of creative accounting techniques.

Are you all going to propose a budget that will balance by 2012, and how pristine will you be in your own budget assumptions? Are you going to use --

Mr. Hoyer. Historically in the minority, we have been as pristine as the President, and what I mean by that is we were very candid about that. We did not take AMT, and we did not take the cost of the war. Why didn't we? Because we would be trying to compare our apples with his oranges, and our apple would look not nearly as tasty, to keep my metaphor going, but it was not honest in that we knew there was going to be an AMT cost, and we knew the war was going to cost more money, so that when you got the balance by 2012, as we did in our last budget that we offered, we did it on the same ground rules that the President had said in order to convey to the American public what you are doing. He did not. We did. We intend to do that again.

Now, I do not want to anticipate what the President is

doing. John Spratt has a very difficult job, putting together a budget which reflects the priorities of the American people and, at the same time, moves us towards balanced budgets, you know, 2007, so it was a 6-year cycle, 2007 to 2012 the last time. If we can do that, we are going to do that. We are going to try to do a budget that is as accurate as we can be and still have the American public understand the relationship between the President's budget and ours, and we will talk about it. If he does not include AMT, if he does not include the cost of the war, you know, we will have to, in effect, put that aside when he talks about that. Therefore, war costs are emergency expenditures, but they exacerbate -- they make worse the budget.

Q Mr. Leader, what happened last night on the House floor, and did the Democrats really amend the bill last night with a napkin or whatever the Republicans were referring to, that last minute change?

Q Wait. Let me ask one follow-up on that.

If I were, let's say, a silver haired, you know, tall, good-looking Member of Congress and I said the gentleman is being disingenuous, would you move to have those words stricken from the record? And do not change my hypothetical, please.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I did not say it.

Q That is why I am asking you not to change my hypothetical.

Mr. Hoyer. The person who said it was not silver haired or a judge, and I appreciate your observation, but I think saying a Member is disingenuous is contrary to the rules. I think that answers your question. Does it?

Q Exactly. The napkin?

Mr. Hoyer. Now the napkin.

This bill is going to have, probably, unanimous support. I think we had it last night, and we are going to have it today. There is no Member who wants to go home and say, well, you know, people all abuse their power and still get their pensions. They are all going to say they ought to lose their pensions. Some people say it was not perfect, and one of the people who said it was not perfect was Boehner yesterday afternoon, and he said that the 2009 date that was included was putting off the effective date of this act until January 1st, 2009. Now, I disagreed with putting off that date. So it was not hard for me to agree with Mr. Boehner because I already put my oar in.

The reason it was done, so you understand it was no nefarious thing, is the Senate has passed January 2009, and under the 27th amendment, you cannot affect a Member's pay while in Congress. The purpose of that amendment was so that we could not increase our salary. COLA adjustments

have been ruled by the Court as not an increase in salary. That is what the Court says, a ruling of which I dearly agree.

The fact of the matter is that, if you cannot affect a Member's salary while in the current term, the Senate counsel advised put it in January 2009 so it is the next Congress because, if you adversely affect their pension rights, you are adversely affecting their compensation.

My response was, hey, if somebody breaks the law, is convicted of and is subject to pension forfeiture, let them argue that. So, when Boehner said, you know, we ought to make it effective immediately, I agree with that, and staff came to -- Ms. Pelosi's staff was the one working it -- came and talked to Ms. Pelosi and I and some other leaders who happened to be meeting. My immediate response was I think he is right. Let us change it.

Q So what happened about the napkin?

Mr. Hoyer. I do not know that it was done on a napkin. I was not present at the immaculate conception of this amendment, so I do not know whether it was on a napkin. It was on some piece of paper, the consistency of which I do not know.

Q Can I follow up on that?

Mr. Hoyer. He wants to follow up on the consistency.

Q Not on the napkin but on the subject of the civility

in the House. You see, the Republicans are getting angrier and angrier about this.

Q And you said you were serious about it.

Mr. Hoyer. I am serious about it.

Q So when are they going to stop feeling like this? When are they going to feel like they are actually participating in the process of these two H.R.'s, 78 and the Pension bill?

Mr. Hoyer. Let me say the Pension bill and the Delegate bill, they are really part of this rules effort that we are making trying to get us going. Obviously, the Delegates, we want them to vote in the committee, and we want them to have a reason to come to the floor and participate with their colleagues and express their opinions so their constituencies and everybody else will say, yes, that is the way the Constitution reads and that is fine.

With respect to this bill, it was with overwhelming sentiment in the House of Representatives -- you are going to see it tonight or today -- that people who violate their oath of office should not get their pensions. Now, some Members said there could be a lot of other things included. That is true. It could be much more expansive. This bill, it is almost exactly like the bill we passed in 2006 through the House. It did not pass in the Senate. So we feel this is really the early start.

Now, I met with the chairman today. We want things to go regular order. We want Republicans to have an opportunity to offer amendments in committee. The Rules Committee is going to allow amendments on the floor. I have told all of you. I said we were going to be fair, not stupid. I do not intend nor does Speaker Pelosi intend to simply set ourselves up and set a lot of our Members up for 30-second ads or 60-second ad amendments, but we do intend to engage, involve and allow Republicans to have substantive opportunities as we consider legislation, but last night was unfortunate and the tempers got a little strained. You will note after, if you watched the whole thing, I talked about Mr. Boehner, and there were three other speakers. They all decided not to speak, but it just got a little bit out of hand. We got it in hand, and while I do not know that it is all sweetness and lightness, it was somewhat calmed down.

Q Last year, the President used his address to talk about his competitiveness initiative. How does that compare with your own innovation agenda, and what do you think the outlook is for that?

Mr. Hoyer. I will answer this briefly because the innovation agenda is going to be one of those items, the component parts of which we are going to ask the committees to deal with, and they will deal with it, but the President's competitiveness agenda came out after we issued

the innovation agenda, as you know, and mirrored much of what was said in there, and hopefully, because of that, we can reach some bipartisan agreement on some of the items in there, of which energy independence of course, as you know, is one. Connectivity for all people on the Internet and giving them that opportunity was another, so --

Q What about education?

Mr. Hoyer. The education we have made, as you know, part of our Six for '06 education component early on. There are other things we want to do in terms of accessibility and affordability for higher education as well as No Child Left Behind, as you know, which is going to be one of the big bills that we are going to consider that has to be reauthorized that I, personally, and Chairman Miller agree on the accountability component, but we also agree that some of the facets of that bill have made it very difficult to be applied and implemented in a fair way by local educational institutions.

Thank you.

Q What time are we going to see the vote on the Pension bill?

Mr. Hoyer. It will be early, before 2:00.

[Whereupon, at 12:06 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]