

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, February 13, 2007

11:06 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning. Thank you very much for being here.

We continued at 9, 10 a.m. for legislative business, which we are in now, as you know, on the rule on the Iraq debate; and we will take that vote -- last votes of the day probably around 12 p.m. We start into our substantial debate -- as you know, the rule allocates 18 hours to each side for debate. We contemplate that that will be sufficient time for all Members who want to speak, if all Members want to speak.

The rule, as you know, also allows the majority leader, in consultation with the minority leader, to extend on an hour-by-hour basis. So the debate may go longer if every Member wants to speak. If you multiply five times 435, it is more minutes than we have allocated, but we have made a provision that more would be available.

We will meet at 10 a.m. for legislative business. We will debate the Iraq resolution. We will go to 12 midnight. We will go to 12 midnight tonight. Thursday, the same schedule, 10 a.m. for legislative business, but we will initially deal with the small business tax relief bill.

Q What day?

Mr. Hoyer. Thursday. Which will take probably a relatively short period of time. We believe that we will

not need a rule on that. That we will move ahead by agreement with the Republican side to move that to the floor without a rule. And we think it ought to have broad bipartisan support. Mr. McCrery and Mr. Rangel are bringing it together. They are in agreement on the bill.

As a matter of fact, I will tell you that I have letters here from the Chamber of Commerce. Quote, this legislation provides targeted tax relief that will assist small business job growth -- and they indicate their support.

There is another letter that you may have seen January 22nd -- that letter was dated the 9th. This is a letter of January 22nd referring to the Senate bill. The temporary tax credits will not offset the harm of the permanent tax increase. The Chamber strongly opposes the permanent tax increase used to offset the cost of this legislation. That is what they are saying about the Senate bill.

We hope this will be a bipartisan effort, and we send it to the Senate to facilitate the passage of the minimum wage.

Thursday's debate will continue thereafter on Iraq and will go to midnight. We will meet at 9 a.m. for legislative business on Friday; and we will determine at that point in time how long that will take, depending upon how many people have spoken, want to speak, et cetera.

The resolution, as all of you know, is a very simple, straightforward resolution which we made a determination -- as I said on Russert's show on Sunday, that we made a determination that we wanted a very clear, uncluttered, not confused statement which says two things: A, we will support and protect the troops; B, that we do not support the President's proposal to escalate the numbers by 21,000 in Iraq.

We believe that's what the American people want us to do. Send a clear message. A Republican President has enunciated policy. We think it is appropriate that we respond to that policy, and we will do so.

The time will be managed by Mr. Lantos and Mr. Skelton. They will trade off blocks of time. I will at about noontime offer the resolution and then recognize Speaker Pelosi who will lead off the debate, and then Mr. Skelton will go, and we will have -- many of our veterans who have been in Iraq, Korea, Vietnam and other places will lead some of the debate early this afternoon.

We believe the resolution, as you know, reflects the overwhelming advice of the military, the advice of the Iraq Task Force, the Maliki government's position in terms of more troops and, clearly, the American people's belief as well.

Secondly, let me talk about Katrina. Katrina is a

high-priority item for the Democrats. Jim Clyburn, as chairman of the caucus, led a large delegation of Democrats down to the gulf coast in September. We expect to have initiatives by our committees and by Mr. Clyburn considered early next month on a number of different issues.

Governor Blanco was assured by Mr. Clyburn, Speaker Pelosi, and myself that we believe this to be a very high-priority item and that we have not yet responded appropriately to the devastation visited upon the people of the gulf coast by Katrina and Rita and that far too much time had gone by without us effectively responding.

Chairman Frank, Chairwoman Velazquez of the Small Business Committee and Chairwoman Waters of the Financial Services -- and she chairs the Housing Subcommittee -- those and others will be addressing appropriate responses, but we would expect to do something with both dealing with public entities as well as private individuals as it relates to economic issues, waiver issues, housing issues, small business issues and others.

I talked about the minimum wage, but I want to just repeat that we feel very, very strongly that the minimum wage needs to be passed and passed now. We are hopeful that the Senate will move quickly now that we think we have a bipartisan agreement on a small business tax relief package which we are for, and we said we would move it, and we have

now moved it in a bipartisan way.

Thank you. Questions?

Q Mr. Hoyer, you proved to be such an oracle about last year's election, would you care to venture a guess as to how many Republicans are going to join you on Friday?

Mr. Hoyer. I had so much more information available to me when I was an oracle in July than I do now. I can tell you that a large number of Republicans have spoken out in opposition to the escalation. It remains to be seen whether on Friday or Thursday, whenever we vote on this and complete the debate, whether that group will vote as they have spoken. We hope they will.

Q Do you think there are a lot of arms being twisted? Do you sense that?

Mr. Hoyer. It would appear that that happened in the Senate. I have not seen it or nobody has come up to me -- a Republican -- and told me that that is happening. But I think it would be somewhat naive to think that what happened in the Senate would not come across the Capitol.

Q If you get 280, 290 votes for that resolution, will that be a good indicator that you will get a like number for the conditions that you want to -- Mr. Murtha wants to impose on the supplemental?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know that I want to anticipate that. I don't know that I would adopt that premise. I

think -- I am not sure I would even adopt the premise of the numbers that you are talking about. We will see what the numbers are. I don't want to be an oracle in this case. We will see. We hope and we think that we will be joined by a large number of Republicans.

Clearly, a large number of Republicans, overwhelming number of independents and an overwhelming number of Democrats believe, along with many, many, many of our military experts who have spoken out on this issue, that the President's proposed escalation will not work and will, in effect, send more targets rather than send solutions.

We will have to see on the other. The conditions, as you know, that Mr. Murtha has been talking about I think the American people support. Some of the conditions are -- I don't have an extensive list, but two of the principal ones he is talking about is, if you are going to send troops in harm's way, you need to certify, Mr. President, that they are trained and that they are equipped. I think Mr. Murtha is correct on that. I think the American public would agree with those conditions, and I would think that the Republicans would agree with those conditions. I would certainly hope so. We will see.

Q There is some rumor that there is work under way between the Democratic leadership and the administration on trade agreements, the idea being that trade deals need to be

worked out quickly on Peru, Colombia and Panama. What would it take to get Democrats on board clearing the way for those free trade agreements?

Mr. Hoyer. First of all, there are, obviously, ongoing discussions on these issues. I have had discussions with Susan Schwab. Mr. Rangel has had discussions with her. She is the Trade Representative. And the administration clearly is interested. There are ongoing discussions.

As you know, Democrats have taken the position very strongly that we believe that there needs to be very significant agreements within the four corners of the trade agreement, not as ancillary letters but within the corners of the agreement itself, on labor, working conditions, on workers, and on the environment; and we continue to take that posture.

We are hopeful that the administration will -- which up to this point in time has not been particularly agreeable to that suggestion, but the situation's changed. And, frankly, Speaker Pelosi and I, when we were at the White House, we didn't spend much time on it, but we did spend time on the fact that there was going to have to be a give and take. In this instance, I think that is true.

Q Congressman, last week your office indicated that the Republicans would be allowed to introduce an alternative on Iraq. I wonder if you could walk us through where that

changed?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, we were having a discussion about that and, as I said Sunday and I repeat today, our conclusion is this: In the Senate, they found themselves unable to move forward. Seven of the Republicans who voted not to move forward are now saying it is absolutely critical to move forward, led by Senator Warner who is a friend of mine and for whom I have a great deal of respect.

As we had these discussions we ultimately concluded the only way to make a very clear, unambiguous statement was to say the Republican President has made a proposal, we are not in agreement with that proposal, and that's going to be on the floor.

There are going to be in the near term, as you know, coming up in March, budget proposals, supplementals, shortly thereafter the authorization bill and -- sometime in May -- and the appropriation bill, perhaps sometime in May as well, perhaps.

So, as I said to Mr. Boehner, I said to him, you are going to get that opportunity; and we think that they will have that opportunity. But we have concluded, so that there is no confusion, there is no "I don't like that whereas," "I don't like that wherever" -- it is very simple. If you have seen the resolution, you can read it in about 60 seconds. We support the troops. We're going to protect the troops.

We agree with the President's proposal.

Q Does that differ from when you guys said you were going to give opportunities to the minority?

Mr. Hoyer. No, I don't think it does, in that this is, after all, a response to a Republican President who has made a proposal. This war is now almost 4 years in duration. This Congress has, as you have heard me say, been very complacent and therefore complicit in the failures that have occurred, in my opinion. We have been almost silent on policy proposals made by the administration, and we have not exercised oversight.

There have been 52 hearings from the beginning of January to today, 26 in the House, 26 in the Senate. Mr. Lantos next month is going to have hearings -- extensive hearings on every proposal that's on the floor now about Iraq, every one. So that there is going to be substantial debate, discussion, and activity.

But, as we discussed this, I did say that -- and you are absolutely right. I did say that. But, as we discussed it, as we worked through it, it became clear to us that the only way we could give to the American people a very clear indication of where the Congress stood as it related to the President's proposal was this process. I agree with that.

Q Mr. Blunt described the resolution this morning as endorsement of staying the course. That basically by

approving this resolution you would be saying that what is going on in Iraq and the way it is being handled is -- the sense of the Congress -- being correct and that that is not the will of the American people. That is the spin he is giving this. Do you care to comment on that?

Mr. Hoyer. Mr. Blunt is my friend, but that sounds to me a little bit like Alice in Wonderland. There is nobody in this room, there is nobody in America that believes that opposing the President's escalation is staying the course.

The Democratic leadership in July, September, October, and again just weeks ago in a letter signed -- the first three letters signed by eight of us -- twelve of us on each side, Senate and House, six and six, I think, including Mr. Murtha and myself, signed those first three letters and the last letter signed by Speaker Pelosi and Leader Reid have suggested that we need to change policy, we need to move in a new direction, that we needed to transfer responsibility to the Iraqis, we needed to redeploy our troops out of harm's way. That does not mean withdraw them totally from Iraq. It did not put a timetable on it. But it said we need to change their position vis-a-vis the Iraqi responsibility.

And, thirdly, and I have characterized it -- we didn't say exactly this. I characterized this phrase myself. We needed a diplomatic surge. That we needed to -- as the Iraq

Study Group Task Force indicated, we needed to reach out to the regional states and we needed to reach out to the international community. Because all of the military leaders with whom I have spoken believe this is going to be resolved through a political resolution, through reconciliation of Shi'a and Sunni, through stabilization at the border. But the Iraqis are going to have to do this.

So with all due respect to my friend, Mr. Blunt, he and I are about 180 degrees on that part of the characterization of what this plan is.

Q Going back to Katrina, when the supplemental comes up --

Mr. Hoyer. Yes, about \$3 billion in it is Katrina.

Q Are you suggesting that you may expand that?

Mr. Hoyer. No, I am not suggesting that. I am suggesting that early next month we will be addressing in a way that will involve many committees' work the issues related to Katrina. That is a possibility, but I don't want to anticipate or say that is happening.

Mr. Obey was in the meeting this morning. Mr. Obey obviously gave an opinion that clearly the supplemental is coming up, there was Katrina in there, that they would look at that, but he did not say what he was going to do or what he was recommending to do. So, David, I don't want to anticipate that that means --

Q That will be your vehicle for the Katrina package?

Mr. Hoyer. No, we could have legislation out of Financial Services or legislation out of Small Business or legislation perhaps out of other committees. It doesn't have to exclusively be the supplemental.

Q When are you going to return to regular order? And by using the closed rule again and again don't you run the risk of being accused as being abusive of your power?

Mr. Hoyer. I think we have given the Republicans something to talk about that you like to cover. I don't mean you personally, I mean you collectively.

Yes, it sounds like we are not doing what we said we would do, and I understand that. Here, however, we believe that we're very justified in one of the most important issues confronting the country, which clearly was a huge issue in the election and which got bottled up in the Senate with the whereas clauses. The overwhelming majority -- not overwhelming, the majority of the United States Senate is not for this escalation; and if a vote was called on it that they would vote to oppose the President's escalation. Why are they not doing it? Because they got bottled up and mired in a discussion about the whereas clauses.

So we have made a determination that on this critical question it is very clear what the issue is. Mr. President, we either agree or disagree with the proposal you have made.

I don't believe this is a change. I think suggesting this is a change in policy when we have had at least four escalations in the past where the commander-in-chief clearly has the ability and the generals on the ground clearly have the ability to shift troops, to add more troops, to decrease troops, nobody -- certainly not me -- I don't think there is anybody else that believes that the President couldn't have done this on his own.

In my view, the reason such a big deal has been made of this is because the President did not want to adopt the substantive proposals that have been made from us or from the Iraq Study Group on real change of policy.

Q Sir, back on the resolution itself, though, interestingly enough, Leader Boehner I think issued a couple of news releases saying this was the start of the Democrats' efforts to defund the war. What is your reaction to that?

Mr. Hoyer. Speaker Pelosi and I have said we are going to fund the troops. We are going to protect the troops. And Mr. Murtha has said there will be no defunding of troops in the field, there will be no defunding which will cause any risk to the troops.

Will funding be an issue? Of course it will. This President is now proposing effectively \$608 billion over the next -- I'm not sure what the time frame is -- which Mr. Spratt indicates is more funding than was allocated in

Korea and more funding than was allocated in Vietnam. This Congress has a responsibility to conduct oversight.

There are \$9 billion we can't find. They can't account for \$9 billion. I think the American public thinks that funding issue ought to be addressed. We intend to do it. But this is not a first step, in any event, in any way putting at risk our troops or defunding our troops in the field. Our troops in the field, as long as they are in the field, will have our 100 percent support for their protection and for their success.

Q On that point, sir, aren't you going to put some restrictions on the use of that money, the \$100 billion supplemental?

Mr. Hoyer. I think clearly there -- as I said earlier, Mr. Murtha, for instance, suggested you can't deploy troops unless they are trained. I think every American probably believes that is reasonable. And Mr. Murtha, who was very angry, properly so -- there was a story yesterday or the day before we don't have enough armored Humvees for our people. The fact of the matter, Mr. Murtha has said if you intend to send our people in harm's way, make sure they are protected and have the equipment they need to be successful.

Q Are there plans to complete the CR?

Mr. Hoyer. Let me answer that question, because I didn't address the CR, and then I will accede to the boss

here. The CR we are hopeful, of course, passes as we sent it to the Senate. If it does not, we will have to deal with that CR and, therefore, we may be here longer than Friday.

[Whereupon, at 11:30 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]