

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, February 27, 2007

12:20 p.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning. Good afternoon.

Q Nice profile this morning in the WP.

Mr. Hoyer. The WP?

Affectionately referred to as the hometown newspaper.

Q How much did you pay them?

Q I didn't say that.

Q It is quite a glowing profile.

A I resented some of the attacks on that article, but I am not going to defend myself, take your time up with a defense.

Well, thank you, for the comments on today's clips. Appreciate that.

Welcome back. We are going to have the Iraq supplemental coming up in the near term in the next 2 weeks. There has been a lot of information on that. But the supplemental is not available at this point in time. So we do not know exactly what is going to be in it. Obviously, it will contain funding for our troops.

Speaker Pelosi and I have made it very clear that we are going to support the troops that are in the field. And our caucus has made that clear. And we are going to do that.

As well, we want to make it clear to the administration that we expect the troops to be equipped and properly

trained. I think the American public would expect that as well.

And so we are going to be waiting to get -- and there will be meetings over the next 2 days on exactly what the committee and the subcommittee intends to propose. There have been some articles on that I know, but I have not seen the supplemental nor the specific proposals.

On the budget, we will begin budget -- they will be marking it up in the second week of March and it will be on the Floor. On the third week in March, we are working to craft a budget which invests in the priorities of the American public and reaches balance and uses real numbers. And we don't believe the administration uses real numbers, as you know. We don't believe they have used real numbers ever. The AMT in particular is not counted -- or it is counted, excuse me. We handed out one of our little sheets that I know all of you love, our analysis of what the President's budget does and does not do.

Clearly, one of the things that we think it does is it counts AMT tax increases. In other words, the administration, while claiming to be against taxes, counts additional taxes in their revenue numbers, which is how they have tried to get the balance. In point of fact, they don't get the balance because of the use of the Social Security surpluses. In all candor, as all of you know, both parties

have used Social Security surpluses in the past. But, of course, during the Clinton administration, we did in fact get to real surpluses, that is, surpluses which were above and beyond the Social Security surpluses, not in every year that we had surpluses but in 2 of the years.

CBO, I understand, will be issuing an estimate of 2012, and they will project at least \$100 billion deficit in the year that the President claims balance.

John Spratt and I have been working together with the committee chairmen. John Spratt has a very difficult job to do, but he will be reporting out a budget that, we will project, balances in 2012.

Okay.

Your turn.

Q Mr. Hoyer, concerning where we are with Iraq right now, is the specter of the Vietnam experience hanging over what is going on in Iraq right now and how some of the dates or lack of a date may be on the senate side?

Mr. Hoyer. I think the honest answer to that is, yes, obviously Vietnam was an experience in which we set an objective and we didn't accomplish that objective. Iraq, we set an objective which has expanded greatly. Originally the objective was to remove Saddam Hussein. Substantially, we had mission creep, which the Republicans used to criticize very regularly, but we had mission creep, and the President

expanded what the purpose of the action was. So, to that extent, yes, but there are also many dissimilarities between Iraq and Vietnam.

Q But is that a problem when you come to try to make policy on this because that Vietnam experience essentially has impacts on the public and so resonates to this day.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think that, as we deal with Iraq, the American public has made a very clear judgment that we need to move in a new direction; we need a change in policy. We need to get out of having our troops be the principal force that is trying to secure Iraq's stability and security.

That is a responsibility, as the Iraq Study Group pointed out, of the Iraqis. And then we need to be in a mode of redeployment, of shifting our mission to training, of redeployment and then drawdown. That is what the American public wants to do. Now, the American public does not want to do that in a way that creates the inevitability of carnage in Iraq, but they do want to change policy in Iraq.

My own view, as I have expressed before, is that what the President is proposing is not a change in policy. We have done the surge three times before without any permanent success. And what I mean by permanent success, obviously it had some neighborhoods in some areas of Baghdad temporarily

affected, but very temporary.

So that I think that we are going to try to figure out in the days ahead how we can urge the President to change policy. We have passed a resolution. We had 17 Republicans -- seven Republican Senators, a higher percentage than we had in the House in term of percentages, 7 percent -- 17 is not -- 17 is not 7 percent of the House.

Q Is your objective to get -- to end U.S. participation in the war?

Mr. Hoyer. Our objective is, frankly, to fight terrorism and to defeat terrorism.

Terrorism is present mostly in Afghanistan. Mr. Cheney is over because he doesn't think -- over in Pakistan talking to Musharraf because he doesn't think things are going very well. In part, things aren't going very well because we have shifted our focus from fighting terrorists to Iraq without sufficient resources to do so.

So that we believe the mission in Iraq, as the Iraq Study Group said, needs to be changed so we are not a principal force trying to bring security, stability and the economic and political regeneration the President says is his objective. That needs to be the Iraqis. And the political solution is what is going to result in that -- just one second -- going to result in that.

There was some progress made. I don't know how much

progress, but because I only saw this this morning, apparently they did reach an agreement about legislation, which is going to be presented, for a sharing of revenues. We said that that was necessary. I think that is a positive step.

Now, articulating a step and taking the step are two different things. We will see what happens.

Q Do you believe -- is it fair to say at least that you are pushing or maybe that the Democratic majority is pushing a change in the language in how this is being framed from redeployment or getting out of Iraq to shifting resources to Afghanistan or to terrorism? I mean, the Murtha approach, so far, I think it is fair to say backfired to some degree, things have reached a complete halt in the Senate. It is unclear what is happening in the House. Do you think that if the rhetoric changes to more of a go after Afghanistan, that the Democrats will have a clearer path?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think we have changed that rhetoric. I think that rhetoric has been consistent, but we believe that Afghanistan, there was a consensus in America that the Taliban harbored al Qaeda. Al Qaeda attacked us. Al Qaeda is spreading terrorism, not just in Afghanistan, but in a lot of other places, including now Iraq.

But we are not doing as well as we need to do in Afghanistan to confront terrorists and to succeed there.

And we need to make a greater effort. If resources are limited, we need to redeploy some of those resources to that effort. So redeployment is part and parcel of confronting Afghanistan and providing for a change in responsibility from the United States and its willing partners, which are getting fewer and fewer in number, and in Iraq.

Q What is your preference for how to proceed in the House on Iraq? I am just unclear as to what you are going to do.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, what I am going to do is I am going to talk to our leadership -- our other leadership -- and we are going to talk to Mr. Murtha, Mr. Skelton and others, to determine what we believe is appropriate to offer on the Floor of the House of Representatives. And before we do that, I am not going to go -- I am not going to get ahead of myself.

Q Mr. Leader, if the balance of power on any legislation that binds the President on Iraq is held by a handful of Republicans in the Senate, is there anything you can do about that?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, there are two questions here: Obviously, number one is, what do we want to do? And number 2 is, what can we do? What we want to do, as I just answered, we are working on that. And obviously, I think I have made some, we have made some very specific suggestions.

I am not going to -- the July letter, the September letter, the October letter, the January letter that Reid and Speaker Pelosi sent. They are pretty specific. And the Iraq Study Group mirrors much of what we suggested in terms of redeployment, transferring responsibility, changing the mission to training, economic oversight and accountability, surge in diplomacy. So we made specific recommendations. Now how do you, in language, carry those out? We are talking about that.

On your second question, can we? That is to say, if we -- people criticized the resolution. Barney Frank said, look, the President doesn't think legislation is binding on him. He signs letters when he signs bills and says, yes, but I am not going to follow this.

We passed a resolution, expressed a very straight-forward sentiment. We thought the surge would not work, was not good policy and that we ought to change policy. We don't think this is a change in policy.

Now whether we can do something depends upon whether or not we can pass legislation through the Senate, get it to the President, and the President will sign it. Obviously, all of that is problematic, particularly the President signing something with which he disagrees. We clearly could not override a veto. But that does not mean we do not have the responsibility to move ahead with our suggestions, as we

are doing

Q The Washington Post poll this morning seemed to indicate clearly that the American people actually supported Mr. Murtha's approach requiring more training, more rest, more equipment for these troops that are deploying, even if that meant that there would be fewer troops to be deployed.

Yet, for about a week and a half, the Democrats have been silent as Republicans have attacked and attacked and attacked. And I am wondering, how much damage do you think has been done to what Representative Murtha wanted to do? And why have the Democrats been so reluctant to actually try to defend a proposal that appears to be very popular?

Mr. Hoyer. First of all, did you watch Tim Russert? I was brilliant on Meet the Press. I am sorry you missed it. You recall that I said, in answer to Mr. Russert's question, I thought the American public -- not just what I said, it wasn't any great announcement, I thought that what Mr. Murtha was proposing in terms of our troops being fully trained and fully equipped before we deployed them, the American people thought that made sense. I think it made sense.

Now, you mentioned something that I think is very relevant. The Republicans, for the last week and a half, have been raising the roof. Why? Because if you don't have the facts on your side and you don't have the American

people on your side, you beat on the table as loud as you possibly can to drown them out because what they are arguing for is staying the course, more of the same; not a change in policy, not a new direction.

And, clearly, the American public has stated very emphatically they want a new direction. That is why they have been beating on this so much and why they think this is a gift to them. But the gift is that they want to stay the course. And that is what they have been arguing for the last 10 days very, very vigorously and vociferously.

Q Why is there any question then about going ahead with the Murtha bill proposal? Why do you have to have meetings?

Mr. Hoyer. I have not seen the Murtha proposal. There is no -- the bill hasn't been marked up yet.

Q And what do you think about what your counterparts in the Senate are doing? They are taking a different approach talking about deauthorizing or revoking the authorization.

Mr. Hoyer. Some people here are talking about deauthorizing. I think the authorizing committee is going to be meeting on this, and Mr. Skelton is going to be moving ahead on figuring out whether or not he and the committee feel that deauthorizing is a policy they want to pursue, but I am not going to anticipate that before they make that

determination.

Q You said the CBO would likely predict that in 2012, the President's budget would result in at least a \$100 billion deficit.

Mr. Hoyer. Yes. We have reason to believe they will do that on Friday.

Q If you all actually meet the goal of balancing by 2012, you have a fairly substantial gap to make up, if that is true, do you plan to do that by modifying the President's tax cuts? Do you plan on doing that by decreasing spending? Where do you plan on making up the difference?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think if you look at our budgets that we have offered over the last 2 or 3 years, which have gotten overwhelming Democratic support, you will see that we did not pursue some of the tax cuts for the wealthiest people in America after they are set to expire. And, in fact, we changed some of the priorities the President had proposed. For instance, while he says he is not raising taxes, he raises fees substantially, billions of dollars, on veterans among other things.

Mr. Spratt I think will be pursuing much of the same procedure and policies that he pursued in the previous two budgets in particular, three budgets, to reach balance.

But the answer to your question is, yes, we will not make some of the assumptions the President made; we may make

other assumptions.

Q Mr. Leader, back to Afghanistan, would you consider refocusing on that war through the supplemental maybe focusing some resources and transitioning some resources from the Iraq war to Afghanistan?

Mr. Hoyer. Again, I don't want to anticipate the bill. And I don't have the answer to that question as to whether they have done it or are planning to. They are not going to defund the troops. Whatever the troops need. We say that over and over again. Why do we say it over and over again? Because the Republicans continue to want to scare the American people and mislead the American people that somehow we are going to defund the troops. That is not going to happen, period.

So the answer to your question is, we are not going to take money of troops that are currently deployed or might be deployed and be on the ground and be in harm's way. We are not going to underfund them.

The fact is, however, we have emphasized for some period of time now that we believe Afghanistan is the focus of the fight on terror, that we have distracted ourselves from, and that we need to make sure that we are successful in Afghanistan. I don't think there is much controversy about that, unlike Iraq, in which there is a lot of controversy.

Q Is there anything you can do legislatively to refocus that?

Mr. Hoyer. Sure. And I am sure that we will be addressing that issue. But I don't know exactly in what way the committees are now talking about addressing that issue. But Speaker Pelosi and I and others have made it very clear that we think Afghanistan is very worrisome at this point in time. That is why I pointed out that Vice President Cheney is obviously in Pakistan because the administration is very worried about it. Now we do have NATO engaged there. And that is a positive.

Q Mr. Leader, is it your hope that, following tonight's caucus with your colleagues, that you will have something more workable, more substantive that will come out, that you will have at least something more concrete in which direction you will go in terms of Murtha or --

Mr. Hoyer. Whether it will be after the caucus tonight or in meetings that we have today, it will be our intent obviously to forge a consensus or a bill that can reach very broad, strong support within our caucus.

After all, the objective is to pass something.

Q Has there been a consensus about what you are trying to do?

Mr. Hoyer. No. That is not the implication. That is the objective.

Q How divided though would you say your caucus is? You have members of the Blue Dogs who have come out publicly opposed to the idea of putting conditions on supplementals for troop levels.

Mr. Hoyer. Right. There were two Democrats who voted against the resolution, two.

Caucus is pretty united on the fact that this is not a good policy. Now we are currently working on suggesting alternatives. We are not there, and there is not a consensus on what suggested alternatives. We are working on it.

Q Mr. Hoyer, how closely do you work with the Senate leaders? Are you guys ever going to be on the same page when it comes to Iraq in terms of reauthorization, nonbinding resolutions? It seems like there is just such a disconnect. I might be totally naive and living in some ivory tower here.

Mr. Hoyer. You don't want me to comment on that question.

Q But are you going to -- how often do you talk to the Senate?

Mr. Hoyer. We talk to the Senate regularly. Speaker Pelosi and Leader Reid are in communication regularly. We meet regularly. The Senate -- Leader Reid has a substantially different problem than we do, as you know,

because of the way the Senate operates -- maybe even which Senators operate -- which may answer one part of your question.

The fact of the matter is that we have a different opportunity to move legislation than Senator Reid does. Senator Reid needs a bigger number when it gets up to the Floor. We have seen that. That does not mean that we are divided. It simply means that he's got a different challenge, and he is trying to meet that challenge. And he is trying to work on that challenge. We are trying to help him work on that problem.

When I say we are trying to help him work on that problem, I think it helps Senator Reid when we move something that he can then get over in the House, and I think that is our Six for '06 doesn't mean that he has been able to move all our Six for '06 or any of them right now.

Q What is your strategy for reaching --

Q Well, first of all, you said there will not be an underfunding for troops --

Mr. Hoyer. Right.

Q Is it safe to say that the President will receive all the funds that he has requested for the troops?

Mr. Hoyer. No. Let me tell you, we are going to exercise accountability and oversight. We are not a rubber stamp. We are not here to have the President say, this is

what you're going to do.

Article 1 of the Constitution of the United States says we say what is going to be done. We have a responsibility to the American public to conduct oversight. So it does not mean that whatever the President wants, the President is going to get because he may make mistakes. He has made so many mistakes already on this effort, it is safe to assume he is going to make more. So we are going to have very significant oversight. So that is not safe to assume.

Now who was next.

Yes.

Q Sir, on the strategy of reaching consensus, is it possible to do that from the top down, or do you see this coming up from the committee level?

Mr. Hoyer. My experience over the last 40 years, it works both ways. If the leadership doesn't listen to the Members, it is no longer the leadership pretty soon. And if the Members can't be led into consensus, they are no longer in the majority. So there is a synergy between the two. Clearly, Members -- you know, we have 233 people, independently elected by their constituents, who have a duty to represent their constituents, not Nancy Pelosi or Steny Hoyer or the Democratic caucus. Their responsibility is to represent their constituents.

I was, I think, successful as whip in helping, working

with Leader Pelosi in creating consensus because we understood that, and we talked to them about it. And we tried to take into consideration their views. The only way you create consensus, it's very easy to move something, maybe you get 100 Democrats or 150 Democrats -- but to create consensus, which we need, we need pretty much a large number of Democrats on board on this matter because we know there are a large number of Republicans who have not over the last 6 years exercised any oversight, any change, other than rubber stamping what the President sends down.

David?

Q Can you comment on the seemingly difficult political situation that you are finding yourself in because there is some degree of separation between parties on the war in Iraq, at the same time what Democrats can do in terms of leadership is fairly limited. You saying you're not going to defund the troops. You say you are not going to take what some consider to be drastic steps that clearly would bring on a lot of criticism from the minority of Republicans. Is this a situation that you find yourself in that doesn't have a real true answer that you can provide?

Are you in a situation in which you want to provide answers but may not be able to provide the kind that voters are really looking for?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

No. No. No. Stacy is going to give me the what-for for that glib answer. It is now going to be written down.

Let me say that, personally, I don't believe there are any good alternatives in Iraq.

John Boehner would say winning is the good alternative. If I thought we could do that, hurray. We have had 48 months to do that.

Not only that, we have had 45 months after the President of the United States said we had accomplished what we went to do.

I believe we are in the process of choosing the least dangerous, the least negative alternative.

It is a difficult process. It is a difficult process because this administration didn't send enough troops. Had we stabilized in the first 30 days, I think we would be in pretty good shape. Had Bremer not fired everybody to create a economy and jobs for people, I think we would be in a much better shape. The fact of the matter is the resources and policies promoted by this administration to accomplish the objectives they set for our troops were wrong and insufficient.

Q Sir, are you looking for the best way to lose?

Mr. Hoyer. No, sir. No. I didn't say that at all. I said -- you read General Odom in the WP, as somebody called it -- General Odom says the argument is, if we don't do

this, there is going to be chaos. This is chaos. There has been chaos. We are saying that, and we have said this over and over again.

Let me go through it again. We need to transfer responsibility to the Iraqis. We went there to remove Saddam Hussein. He is gone.

The Iraqis have the responsibility for their country, not America. We need to engage the regional countries. They are going to be adversely effected either way, no matter what happens in Iraq, if it goes wrong.

We need to engage the residents of Iraq in reconciliation and share the revenues. I said they made a step here. I want to see success. Let me make it emphatically clear. I want to see success.

The President said in his State of the Union Address, nobody votes for failure, and I said, Amen. I didn't vote for failure, and I am angry about the fact that this administration has pursued failed policies which were predicted to fail by the military. I want success.

Q Can the situation be resolved in Iraq through the use of American military force?

Mr. Hoyer. Generals say, no.

Q What do you say?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think so. Let me amplify that a little bit. I don't think so because we haven't done it

through military force. We have the best military in the world, period, bar none.

We have not brought the security and the stability the administration predicted. Why? Because the policies that have been given and the resources given to our military have not been sufficient, not appropriate. And the mission that has been set for them, most of the generals now say is not, cannot be accomplished by the use of our military force; it can be accomplished only through the political will and actions of the Iraqi people themselves, so I share that opinion. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:46 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]