PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,

STENY H. HOYER

***

Tuesday, March 3, 2009

11:05 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning. Yeah, good morning.

Q Good morning.

Mr. Hoyer. Is it cold in here? Every time I come in here it seems to be cold. You are hot?

Q 74.

Mr. Hoyer. 74. That is a lie, believe me.

Let me start with the meeting that we had down at the White House last week. The President asked the leadership, bipartisan leadership of the House and the Senate and the bipartisan leadership of the Armed Services Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Intelligence Committees, to come down to the White House prior to his speech at Camp Lejeune, announcing his policy on carrying out his pledge to withdraw us from the war in Iraq.

I believe he did exactly what was represented he was going to do. During the course of the campaign, one of his principal foreign policy advisers was asked how he is going to carry that out, and her response was, Well, he will get together with the military leadership, both the people on the ground, the people in the Pentagon, and his security team, think through how this can be done in a way that maximizes the ability to maintain stability and to have a successful transition from a U.S. presence to Iraqi hegemony.

I think the plan that he has proposed does that. I think it

was thoughtful. I think it was done -- Secretary Gates, as a matter of fact, indicated it was the plan he suggested. It is 3 months longer than the President suggested in terms of transition, 16 to 19 months, but I think it is a plan that has a high likelihood of working.

Clearly, like any plan, it will be contingent, as we move along, on the circumstances on the ground. But I think that the President has, A, done what he said he would do, and it is time for us to withdraw from Iraq and change the mission in Iraq. The SOFA provides for that; the status of forces agreement provides for that. And this plan, I think, is a workable plan and one which I support.

Secondly, on housing, housing continues to be obviously in crisis in this country. This week -- I didn't bring the schedule in. See if we can get the schedule in front of me.

I can use this. Thank you very much.

Q Can I get promoted to deputy chief of staff?

Mr. Hoyer. No, I have an excellent deputy, but she may need an assistant.

Q All right. I haven't screwed up yet.

Mr. Hoyer. No, not yet.

We have suspension bills on the floor today, which we were supposed to do yesterday. We did not have a session yesterday. We had over 100 members call, unable to get planes yesterday, so it was obvious that with that kind of absenteeism, we would

reschedule much of that work today and tomorrow. We will have suspensions tomorrow as well.

We have the Helping Families Save Their Homes Act also scheduled and -- as well as the D.C., District of Columbia vote -- thank you -- bill. We are moving ahead on both those pieces of legislation.

There has been substantial discussion about the homeowners bill, the homeowner stability plan, which also deals with a title out of Judiciary which is the bankruptcy title, and a title out of Financial Services, which deals with the issue of refinancing, and trying to -- both with Fannie and Freddie, modifying their loans so that we can keep people in their houses; and also to encourage other servicers to do the same, as well as obviously strengthening Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and also making permanent the $250,000 for the FDIC insurance.

That bill is, I think, working its way so that it will be ready to come to the floor this week; and I am hopeful that we will have final agreement on that bill by the end of today.

Stabilizing the housing market we think is critical. Clearly, foreclosure of a home not only impacts on the family that loses its home, but also on its neighbors and on its community and on its political subdivision, whether it is a city, county, or State.

On the District of Columbia bill, we passed this, as you know, 2 years ago. I feel very strongly that it is a denial of

democracy, in the country that perceives itself rightfully as the beacon of democracy, not to have a full voting Member of the capital of its country and its citizens.

There are some 600,000 people who live in the District of Columbia. They are American citizens, like those who live across the Anacostia or across the Potomac or live north of the District in Maryland. They are successor citizens, from my perspective, of Maryland citizens. I quoted Madison in an article that I wrote for the Washington Post, in which Madison clearly observed that we needed a Federal capital, but clearly he believed the Congress would ensure that they did not lose their rights as citizens.

The most precious right that a citizen has is the right to vote and the right to be represented, after voting for a Representative, by that Representative in a meaningful, full, participatory way; and that means the Representative of the District of Columbia having the vote. I am hopeful that we will obtain that objective in the near future, and I am hopeful that we will be able to put that bill on the floor this week. That is my intent.

As you know, the Senate, in its consideration of the bill, added a number of amendments, one of which was to, in effect, repeal most of what the District of Columbia, that they have chosen with respect to weapons, guns. We are talking about how to deal with that. I can't tell you exactly how that is going to be done at this point in time, but we are working on it. And I am

hopeful that we will proceed on that bill shortly, this week.

The budget has been sent down to us, and I will end on this. The budget, I think, is -- as has been observed by a number of people -- one of the most honest budgets in terms of projected actual costs and expenses of any budget that I have seen. It fully anticipates the costs of Iraq and Afghanistan. It anticipates the cost of adjusting the alternative minimum tax, which we do every year. It anticipates the cost of adjusting the reimbursement to docs for their services, which would otherwise be capped and, frankly, diminish participation in Medicare, which would undermine the seniors' health care.

It also makes some very solid, in my opinion, suggestions for the priorities of this administration -- which they have made very clear, and which the President talked about at his State of the Union -- on energy independence, on the availability of affordable, quality health care to all of our people, the necessity to contain costs of health care, and lastly, to make sure that our citizens are well educated and able to compete in the global marketplace.

Mr. Spratt will be considering that budget. We don't have the specifics; we have an outline. We expect the specifics in about 3 weeks, around the 1st of April; and once we get those specifics, I am hopeful that we will have a budget on the floor shortly thereafter. I think Mr. Spratt and the Budget Committee have sufficient information now to proceed, but they don't have

the specifics which they would really need.

I hope to get that done so we can also put the Appropriations Committee in a place where they can move ahead on the 12 appropriations bills. I am not a fan of omnibuses that we passed last week, the Chairman is not; they are not the way to go. I am hopeful that we will, and have every intent of following regular order with respect to appropriations bills this year that will flow from the budget process.

Let me stop and let you guys take your turn.

Q Mr. Leader, on the D.C. vote bill, do you feel that if the gun repeal amendment -- as it was passed in the House, if the Republicans find a way to put that in, is that likely to pass?

Mr. Hoyer. When you say "passed the House" --

Q Sorry. Passed the Senate. Beg your pardon.

Mr. Hoyer. The reason I ask is, we did pass that in the House. Essentially that is House language that they have added to a Senate bill on D.C. You recall we had a bill last year in which the Childers amendment was offered as a substitute and was adopted. I voted against it, but it was adopted.

Q So that will be adopted again if they find a way to put it on a motion to recommit or --

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I don't think they can put it on a motion to recommit, which is why we have to figure out what we can do with the rule. The irony is, we may be in a position where, if it passes, we may not be able to pass the bill; if it doesn't pass,

we may not be able to pass the rule on the bill.

It makes it a little complicated, but we are working on it?

Q When is the vote?

Mr. Hoyer. We are working on it. It is scheduled this week, And I am hopeful that we will proceed this week.

Q Are you considering a closed rule for that?

Mr. Hoyer. Depends. There are some amendments that the Senate added on that I think have merit. For instance, I am very much for ensuring that there is an accelerated review process of this legislation.

I am for -- and we have already changed it in our bill -- making it active in the 112th Congress, operative in the 112th, as opposed to the 111th so you don't have to have a special election either in the District or in Utah.

Q Sir, could you describe a little more, could you elaborate when you said "if this were to pass," this sort of amendment -- I mean, you said you don't foresee the possibility of it being in a motion to recommit. Is there a possibility it could be --

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think it is germane on a motion to recommit.

Q Okay. Right.

Mr. Hoyer. We dealt with that, as you know, 2 years ago. The rules have been changed so that the pay-for provision that the additional member -- which is a negligible cost, but nevertheless

a cost, but that, under the old rules, broadened the germaneness very substantially and made the gun amendment germane.

Q Okay.

Mr. Hoyer. We have changed that rule, so currently that, I don't think, would be a germane amendment on a motion to recommit, which is why, of course, therefore, the rule becomes important.

Q So, in other words --

Mr. Hoyer. You understand what I am saying?

In other words, therefore, you shift your focus from the motion to recommit to whether you are for or against the rule. And that is why we are kind of considering the rule itself.

Q So that will come up today in the Rules Committee?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think the rule will come up today. We are working on it to see whether and how we can handle this.

Q Mr. Leader, today Ellen Tauscher is introducing a piece of legislation which would sort of go back and strip out the "don't ask, don't tell" policy from 1993. What do you think of that? And what are the potential potholes that this new President could hit with this compared to his predecessor when that was implemented some 16 years ago?

Mr. Hoyer. You know, we have had a lot of military leaders in the interim say to themselves, sort of agreeing with Barry Goldwater, you know, I care whether people can shoot straight -- their talent, their contribution, their ability to assist in the defense of our Nation. And I think -- personally, I think that is

the focus that we ought to be on.

But we got a lot of very big issues, and I think the Department of Defense will be engaging that as well in terms of considering the viability of that policy going forward.

I was not for that policy. But the viability of that policy going forward, I think there has been a maturation, if you will, in the military and in the public about that issue.

Q Are we past that issue from 1993, when this was so hypercontroversial?

Mr. Hoyer. I think not with everybody, but -- I haven't seen Ms. Tauscher's bill, Congresswoman Tauscher's bill, but I think this is something that obviously continues to come up. And I think it is appropriate to bring it up to review it in terms of its effectiveness and its impact on the service itself.

Q You mentioned the housing bill, and the hope for a deal by the end of the day. Some changes have been in discussion. I am wondering what those may be. Can you address that at all?

Mr. Hoyer. I think essentially the concern is that we want to ensure that those people who get relief have tried the other avenues. This is, after all, a part of a much larger, but integrated effort to try to stem the tide of foreclosures and the loss of homes.

Obviously, the other three titles in the bill that I referred to just now are part and parcel of that -- Barney Frank -- and the Hope for Homeowners, Barney Frank has said, hasn't worked,

obviously, as well as we would have hoped it would have worked.

There are additional incentives for servicers to try to go in and refashion loans, to modify the existing terms both in terms of principal and monthly payments so that --

Q By additional, you mean additional changes to the bill that would --

Mr. Hoyer. I think the changes that are being focused on right now are not so much with the financial services, but with the bankruptcy, to make sure that the people who are subject to having bankruptcy -- judges modify in bankruptcy the loans.

As you know, under present law, you can modify a second home; you can't modify a first. That seems somewhat perverse. Obviously, the intent is to stabilize the market for first loans so people can have homes, and encourage lenders to make loans, and not have their security put at risk. I think that is a worthy concern. I share that concern.

Q So the changes are more along the lines of what Ms. Tauscher was pushing for last week?

Mr. Hoyer. More along the lines of trying to ensure that before you get there, there has been a good-faith effort to utilize other programs available, yes. Yes, sir.

Q Mr. Hoyer, I want to find out on the D.C. voting bill, one, what your thoughts are on the Senate, basically relating to the gun amendment; and then, two --

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I voted against the Childers amendment when

it was -- essentially, it is the Childers amendment. I voted against it when it was considered in the House, but it passed pretty handily in the House, as you know.

Q Your thoughts, why do you oppose the idea behind it?

Mr. Hoyer. Generally, I oppose it on principle. It doesn't affect Maryland, it doesn't affect Virginia, it doesn't affect any other State in the Nation. It affects the District of Columbia.

We have given the District of Columbia home rule. The District of Columbia has made determinations and has made changes that they believe are in compliance with the Supreme Court finding. I think that is for them to do. So, on principle -- in terms of the policy of home rule and consideration of the District of Columbia's ability to manage its own laws, I think, on principle, this is not appropriate. So I think that it shouldn't be on this bill.

And I think it is somewhat ironic that a bill that is to empower the citizens of the District of Columbia and their Representative to have equal status with all other citizens in the Nation -- really not equal status, but equal status in the House of Representatives -- that at the same time legislation is offered to take away from those citizens the ability to make their own laws. It is antidemocratic, squared.

Q On the housing bill, what is your target date to bring that to the floor now?

And if I may, I would like to ask another question about Cuba

policy and --

Mr. Hoyer. Can I answer the first question? I will give you another question.

Q Sure. Thanks.

Mr. Hoyer. I am hopeful that we will have this on the floor on Thursday. I think good progress has been made. My observation is, this is exactly the way the legislative process ought to work. And Chairwoman Lofgren, who is the Chair of the subcommittee, has been working very productively with a lot of different people.

Ms. Tauscher has been working productively with a lot of different people on this issue; and I think we can come to an agreement that I think will be good legislation.

Now, the second question?

Q Yeah, the second question.

I know you passed the omnibus and it is in the Senate, but there are being some Cuba provisions on it that are not so terribly popular. And I wonder if you would object if the Senate changed those, and if you are possibly in talks with Senate leadership about that?

Mr. Hoyer. First of all, I think you need to remember the context of the omnibus. There were provisions -- in specific, there were provisions on the -- what do we call it -- Financial Services Subcommittee of Appropriations; it used to be Treasury, Postal. I used to serve on it a long time ago; I forgot the new name.

But anyway, Chairman Serrano included provisions and marked up in subcommittee, and the Senate had provisions; and in December they reached, in effect, a conference agreement on that provision, and that conference agreement was included in the bill. So, from that standpoint, this is not an unusual process. Both Senator Durbin, who is the chairman in the Senate, and Congressman Serrano agreed, and obviously we have now passed that.

There was controversy regarding Cuba. Cuba is always a controversial item in terms of what we ought to be doing in terms of visitation, in terms of payments from the people living here, back to Cuba, and in terms of trade, agriculture. There are all sorts of issues that have been controversial.

But, you know, essentially, as I understood the agreement by the Republicans from Senator Reid, having discussed this with Senator McConnell, this in fact would be treated like a conference agreement and would be passed as a conference agreement, and there was agreement on that.

So we will see what they do. But it is controversial, and we will have to see what they do. I don't know. Is that responsive to your question?

Q It doesn't sound like you are talking to them about taking those Cuba provisions out. That doesn't sound like that.

Mr. Hoyer. That is accurate, yeah. It is essentially, we view this as a conference report. Obviously, a conference report has to be passed in both Houses in the same position -- we had a

little problem on that a couple years ago, as you recall -- in the same position and sent to the President. And I hope that is what happens.

Q Do you anticipate needing a CR to allow the Senate to finish its work?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, the Senate is obviously working its will, and we will see.

The CR, as you know, runs out on the 6th. There may need to be an enrolling CR, which simply says for the purposes of getting it from here on Thursday or Friday to the White House, that we will -- but neither the Speaker nor I nor Mr. Obey want to see a CR.

Q Sir?

Mr. Hoyer. So we don't anticipate a CR.

Senator Reid believes he can get this done by Thursday night.

Q Without any amendments?

Mr. Hoyer. He didn't say that. But he said by Thursday night, and we will have to --

Q Because if the Senate passes --

Mr. Hoyer. We are scheduled to meet on Friday. I am hopeful that we can get this done by Thursday night. But if we can't, we will be here Friday, yes.

Q There has been some discussion again about the line-item veto. And there is a Feingold-Ryan press conference about it. What are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Hoyer. I am not for the line-item veto.

Q Even this newest proposal?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I haven't seen their newest proposal. If you want to explain it to me, maybe I can give you an off-the-top-of-the-head opposition.

Let me tell you what my -- I think we discussed this maybe 2 or 3 weeks ago about what essentially was an enhanced rescission proposal, which said the President could sign a bill, take something out, send it back here, whatever the item was.

Q And then you guys --

Mr. Hoyer. And then we could pass it by majority vote in the House and Senate, and it would be law -- wouldn't go to the President at that point in time, which is a compromise.

But the line-item veto, in my opinion, skews the balance of power between the President and the Congress. Under Article I, it is the Congress that makes policy.

Now, the President has the opportunity to veto. But I am not for having him go through every line in a bill, every item in a bill, and say, I don't like this. George Bush did that, President Bush did that. He did it by letter. He would write a letter: I have signed this bill, but by the way, I am not going to comply with paragraph A and paragraph D and paragraph F.

I thought that was not legal, frankly. I thought it was inappropriate at best, and not legal at worst.

So I have not seen Mr. Ryan and -- who is the Senator?

Q Feingold.

Mr. Hoyer. Feingold. I haven't seen their proposal.

My expert, Ed Lorenzen, on those issues, we haven't discussed it, so --

Q Sir?

Mr. Hoyer. But generally, that is my -- philosophically, I am not and have been opposed to a line-item veto, and I think I speak for essentially the House itself. I don't mean every person in the House, but the majority.

Q Sir, could I just get clarity on this D.C. vote issue? Do you think a gun amendment or gun provision will be attached to the legislation in the House or not?

Mr. Hoyer. I think the District of Columbia bill ought to have one subject -- I made that point, including I am not happy that Utah is in it. I think the principle of allowing the Representative of 600,000 American citizens to have a full vote in the House of Representatives ought to be considered on its merit, up or down, unconfused by issues which may be related, but certainly do not impact on that central, critical consideration in a democracy. So that is my feeling.

You asked me tactically whether or not it will have to be in or out. We are working on it. We are having to see whether we can get the votes to pass it. But I feel very strongly that it is unfortunate that we have added extraneous issues.

Tom Davis added Utah not because it was a principle, but

because, as a pragmatic politician, he felt that is the way he could move it. But I don't confuse myself that that has anything to do with the principle involved. It has to do with the pragmatic politics of getting it through.

I think the same is true of guns.

Q Mr. Leader, a question on earmarks.

The White House indicated the President is going to sign the omnibus. But yesterday the White House press secretary said the President was working on some sort of guidelines going forward, suggestions for the Hill to reform the earmark process going forward.

Do you think more reforms are needed, in addition to what the House has already done on earmarks, and do you think it is appropriate for the White House to tell Congress what to do on this?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think the White House has the ability to tell us what to do. I hope all of you got that down. It is certainly appropriate for the White House to suggest ways of going forward so that we can have an agreement between the White House and ourselves.

We have made very substantial reforms in the congressional initiative process. My saying that won't stop you from quoting me as saying earmarks -- I don't mean quoting me, but using earmarks.

Earmarks, though, is almost a pejorative term. Earmarks is something simply the Congress added onto the bill as opposed to an

earmark that the President added onto the bill. I hardly ever hear anybody write or talk about the President's earmarks. But, of course, he has most of the earmarks.

Q He didn't suggest any in last year's bill. Obama didn't ask for any.

Mr. Hoyer. The question going forward is that we want to continue to make the earmark process, process of adding congressional initiatives to the bill, transparent, identifiable, known to the public, subject to consideration on the floor, as we have done.

We also -- Mr. Obey and Mr. Inouye announced further reforms in terms of limitations that not only earmarks, but all requests for congressional add-ons be announced and online.

I think there are additional things we can do and consider. We have had discussions with the White House on concerns that it has, and I think they ought to be considered by us.

Q What are those?

Mr. Hoyer. No, I don't want to go into specifics until Mr. Obey makes -- I don't want to anticipate his further proposals. As I say, he and Senator Inouye did announce some specifics in addition to what we did the last Congress.

The Republicans now want to talk about this, which is appropriate, but the Republicans quadrupled earmarks from 1994 to 2006 -- 1995, I guess -- quadrupled, notwithstanding the fact that they during their campaigns said they weren't for that.

I philosophically believe that it would be an undermining of the Article I responsibilities given to the Congress of the United States if it were to abandon its right to add items that it believes are priorities for our country and for the communities represented by Members of Congress -- up. What a lousy sentence that is.

But you get the point that that is, I think, our responsibility, and I think we ought to keep that responsibility. But at the same time we ought to give confidence to the American public that we are exercising that authority in a responsible way.

Q Do you think --

Staff. Last question.

Q Do you think that -- here is this first appropriations bill of his Presidency to a President who ran on kind of an antiearmark platform, and now you have got Senator McCain back up in the Senate doing his annual routine of just reading these lists of what he says are silly earmarks.

Is the Congress needlessly embarrassing the new President by this? Why not send him a bill with -- strip out these earmarks?

Mr. Hoyer. The President, of course, had earmarks, as you recall -- maybe not last year, but in years prior to that -- for Illinois, because he believed that there were priorities in Illinois that, as a U.S. Senator, he wanted to address.

The fact of the matter is, I think the President is right. This is last year's business; it should have been accomplished

last year and completed last year. And I think the President is saying, Look, this is last year's business. While it was passed this year, it was marked up last year and done last year under the rules that they had in place. And I am going to sign this bill and get on with the business that confronts my administration. And the business that -- I happen to think, by the way, that the omnibus bill is a good bill.

But confront the business at hand, and that is dealing with the economy, dealing with energy independence, dealing with health care affordability and accessibility, dealing with education, and dealing with a myriad of other issues that he needs to deal with. And I don't think he needs a needless disagreement on the omnibus with the Congress.

And I don't think it is an embarrassment to him at all. He was not part and parcel, frankly; he was in the Senate, but as he points out, he was largely on the campaign field with Senator McCain -- campaign trail.

I don't think it is an embarrassment to the President. I think this is last year's business. He is getting it out of the way as we move forward on the business that he has been elected to deal with.

Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 11:38 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]