

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

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Tuesday, March 13, 2007

11:07 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Sorry I'm late.

Q Were you filling out your March Madness brackets?

Mr. Hoyer. I start with the winner, Maryland, then back up from there. Really doesn't matter who the other teams are. I think Williams was very savvy, he just had them lose to Miami just to get angry. I don't know how many basketball fans we have in the crowd. As a number of you know, I am a big Maryland basketball fan.

Any event, thank you very much for being here. Our floor schedule is, and we are in session now, we have 10 suspension bills. Wednesday we are going to start on three of these bills, which deal with transparency and openness in government, a very timely topic indeed if one reads the newspapers as all of you do, or listen to the radio as to what has been going on in the administration of late. Or at least, the disclosures that have happened as late.

On Wednesday, we'll meet at 10, consider four bills from the Oversight and Government Reform Committee, the first of these three bills will be suspension bills, a bill updating FOIA, the Federal Information Act, Freedom of Information Act; a bill regarding Presidential records, and a bill on Presidential Library donations. Then we will consider H.R. 985, The Whistleblower Protection Act under a rule.

On Thursday, we will consider a bill regarding limitation on no-bid contracts, which have proliferated very greatly, including at least one major company who wants to headquarter itself in Dubai. Friday there will be no votes.

Congressional accountability and oversight we think is very, very important. We have been having -- we have had 106 full committee oversight hearings in the House, 97 full committee and subcommittee hearings on Iraq alone in the House and Senate. We think they have resulted in continuing to get a better picture for the Congress and for the country on what has been happening and is happening in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Department of Defense.

We have already enacted a stronger ethics bill, pay-as-you-go budget rules, and accountability on earmarks. The five bills that we are talking about today, or this week, Freedom of Information Act, the Presidential Records Act, the Library Donation Reform Act, the Whistleblower Protection, and the Accounting in Contracting Acts are a continuation of this effort that we have begun and which the American people expect.

Restoring oversight we think is one of our most important efforts. There was no accountability and no oversight essentially in the last three Congresses, which was self-evident, and one of the reasons for that was of course they did not meet sufficiently to have enough time

for committees to meet. It's hard to know which was the chicken or the egg. They didn't want to conduct oversight, and therefore there was no necessity to have committees meet substantial periods of time, including, by the way on Fridays, which is unusual, of which has been happening.

On the Iraq supplemental; the Iraq supplemental, as you know, has now been released. It provides for benchmarks and oversight of what's happening in Iraq. We have a document that we have given to you: "Republicans Continue to Give Bush a Blank Check."

I mentioned this last week, I will mention it again. Adam Putnam is quoted as saying, if this were on our watch, we could do it before supper. No doubt in my mind they could do it before supper. No doubt in my mind they could do it in 15 minutes. Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. It doesn't take much time to do a rubber stamp and say to Mr. President, Mr. President, whatever you want, whenever you want it, under whatever conditions you suggest.

Of course, they could have adopted it in a very quick fashion, of course they wouldn't have very substantial discussion, because they exercise no oversight and no accountability.

What Democrats are trying to do, A, we are supporting our troops with all the funds that have been requested, and more; B, we are saying to the Department of Defense you have

adopted certain guidelines which you believe to be necessary to protect our troops and to have them as effective as they can possibly be. Follow those guidelines. And if you don't follow them, waive them. But give a reason for waiver, why it's in the national interest.

This does not tie the hands of any general, any colonel, any sergeant, any private on the ground in Iraq or Afghanistan, period. Assertions to the contrary are false, misleading and for political purposes only. There is no micromanaging of the effort in Iraq or Afghanistan.

There is, however, from a policy-making perspective, which the Congress is and is supposed to be and contemplated to be under our constitution, expectations for performance, not only to protect our troops, to train our troops, and to make sure they are fully equipped, but also to do what the President said we expect the Iraqis to do in terms of their own actions on the ground, in terms of deploying their troops to protect their country, to provide security and stability in their neighborhoods.

We do expect Iraqis to follow what they have said they were going to do in terms of sharing oil revenues, of reconciliation between the sectarian interests in terms of passing laws to protect individual rights, which they said they would do, of amending their constitution, pursuing provincial and local elections as they said they were going

to do.

We think it is appropriate to let the Iraqis know that the American public is investing \$8 billion a month in stabilizing and securing Iraq and providing an environment in which their democracy can operate, and it is reasonable for America to expect that Iraqis will carry their fair share of the load; the elimination of militias, not pursuing any political constrictures on our troops or Iraqi troops of going after terrorist or insurgents, whether they be Sunni or Shi'a or others.

We believe all of those are reasonable expectations that the American public have in mind. And if the Iraqis do not meet their responsibilities, then we believe the American taxpayer has a reasonable expectation that we will bring our people home.

General Petraeus said last week, or earlier this week, last week that this is not subject to a military victory, it needs to be a political victory. We agree with that. What we have fashioned, and we think we have brought together a large consensus within our caucus, which probably every member of the caucus could say I wish that was in there or I wish that wasn't in there, but Mr. Obey, Mr. Murtha, Speaker Pelosi, myself and others have spent a lot of time talking to our members.

Again, I will go back; yes, it could have been done by

supper if we hadn't cared what members thought, if we hadn't cared what the American public thought, and we simply wanted to rubber stamp what the President proposed. That is not our role, that is not the duty the American public gave to us in November, and we believe that this is a response to them, an effective response to them.

It will not, in any way, undermine our troops' ability to function on the ground on or our generals to make decisions. It does, however, say to them that we expect there to be a timeframe in which we will chart and achieve progress, and if there is not, then we need to reconsider the deployment of our troops.

Q Republican leaders are accusing the Democrats of buying votes within the caucus because otherwise you won't have support; buying votes with the extra \$20 billion or so in domestic spending. Your response.

Mr. Hoyer. First of all, we are not doing that. Secondly, they are a strange group to talk about buying votes. This is the crowd that took pork barrel spending to new levels of irresponsibility. \$243 million to a bridge to buy 53 votes, apparently. Pretty expensive prices they were willing to pay.

We provide for the BRAC funding, which we said we were going to do, we provide for farmers who have been struck by severe drought over the last 4 years that need assistance.

We provide for DOD treating the people who come back from Iraq and Afghanistan with very severe injuries, much, much, much better, with greater sensitivity than has been done. It is a national scandal at the negligence this administration and the Veterans Administration has exercised vis-a-vis the health care of those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

We provide for PTSD money, we provide for veterans health and active duty health in this bill. We provide for Katrina, another stark example of the negligence and incompetence of this administration dealing with a catastrophe on the grounds of Americans while we're spending \$8 billion monthly in Iraq we still have people without housing, still have people who don't have sufficient health care facilities in New Orleans and in the gulf coast. We provide for that.

So that we have provided for things that we believe are absolutely essential objects of expenditure and they were made necessary by the failure of Republicans in the last Congress to act responsibly, which, of course, is why we had to enact as well nine, all of the domestic discretionary spending this year in that CR, which, by the way, had 57 Republican votes.

Q Are you just assuming that you are not going to get any Republican votes? People say you are not doing much

outreach. Are you figuring you're going to have to do this solely with Democrats?

Mr. Hoyer. I think we're going to have to do it primarily with Democrats. I think we're going to get some Republican votes, personally. I don't know how many, Robin, but I think we need to expect that this is being made a political football. Having said that, I have talked to John Boehner and I intend to talk to John Boehner again about this. We believe that we have provided all of the money the President requested, and more. We're providing more for Afghanistan because we believe the real fight against terrorism is in Afghanistan, and the Taliban are resurging, the administration has indicated it has a concern. We share that concern.

We believe there's a bipartisan consensus to succeed in making sure the Taliban are not resurging and that we re-take the initiative in Afghanistan.

Q The Republican's central argument against this bill is that by setting a date certain, you are signaling to militias, to sectarian forces and to al Qaeda terrorists that they just have to lay low to this date and then resume fighting at that point. What is your response?

Mr. Hoyer. The President, on May 1st, 2003, told the insurgents we've done our job, mission accomplished. That was, of course, some 3 years ago, 4 years ago, just about.

What we say to the Iraqis, what we say to neighboring nations, what we say to the international community is we want to succeed in Iraq. Our President has told us that we are going to accomplish certain things in the near term. Some have talked about the surge being effective in June; by June we would know. I think the Vice President said that. Maybe that's inaccurate. I'm not sure of that.

But, in any event, what we've said is the American public are investing substantial resources; men and women we've asked to serve in harm's ways are being badly injured and some killed, and we ought to have a timeframe in which we are looking at success.

I don't have the vote in front of me; I wish I did. Repeatedly, daily Republicans were asking for an exit strategy in Bosnia. Every day, many of the same Republican leaders now who plead about timeframes were saying we need an exit strategy in Bosnia before we go. The fact is the killing stopped in Bosnia and Kosovo. Democratic governance flourishes in Serbia today. We still have troops there, not very many, keeping the peace, along with a lot of U.N. troops as well.

So those who have now come to we don't want any exit strategy, no time frames, no targets on which success can be measured are the people who, as I pointed out at the beginning, have had a career for the last 6 years of rubber

stamping whatever this administration wanted, however much it cost, and for however long it took.

Q Mr. Leader, you gave the concession about Iran to the moderates. You took the language out, according to reports. Is there anything that you are willing to do for the liberals in addition?

Mr. Hoyer. What we have done in this bill is try to fashion a bill, and let me give you a quote, Maurice Hinchey, is who is perceived to be one of the more liberal members on this issue, very excellent member, good, thoughtful member. He and I served on the Appropriations Committee for a long time.

Washington Post, March 11th. "If we cannot pass a bill like this, the alternative is far worse, a straightforward here's the money, Mr. President, spend it any way you want. The solution us not perfect, Hinchey said, but it's a hell of a lot better than anything else we can get."

What we have tried to do is across the spectrum, listen to people and try to fashion a bill that is acceptable. Nobody wants to undermine the troops. We have not done that. Nobody wants to defund the troops. I say nobody; Speaker Pelosi and I and have indicated we are going to fully fund the troops. We do that. In fact, we give more money for Afghanistan, which we think is a critical objective.

I think Mr. Hinchey's statement is probably felt across the board of our caucus that it is not perfect, but it is a good piece of policy legislation that sets objectives for our country and for our policy.

Q Mr. Hoyer, do you have the votes today to pass this among Democrats if you don't get the Republican votes that --

Mr. Hoyer. I'm not the whip. When I was the whip you could ask me. I can now say I'm not the whip. I am hopeful and believe that we will get the votes. But honestly, right now I don't think -- you understand this just came out on Monday. That was yesterday. So our Members are digesting it. We've been discussing it, you know the parameters; there's nothing shocking, brand new, but it's the first time that they've read it. Probably most of them are the reading it for the first time today so we are going to be whipping it and counting votes and I think we are going to get the vote?

Q Mr. Leader, one of the joint chiefs, General Peter Pace, came out and said -- I can't use that word -- that he didn't support the repeal of "don't ask don't tell" and that homosexual acts are immoral and homosexuals themselves are immoral. Does this give impetus, do you think, to Marty Meehan's fight to repeal "don't ask, don't tell"?

Mr. Hoyer. We are going to deal with that in a timely

fashion. Right now we are dealing with Iraq. General Pace, I know he said that, I didn't see the statement. I don't know what context it was given in, if it was given in the repeal of don't ask, don't tell, but we aren't dealing with that right now.

Q To get back on topic, what is the time schedule regarding --

Mr. Hoyer. Did you hear what she said, to get back on topic?

Q Do you have any kind of time schedule of the supplemental, which you intend to do when?

Mr. Hoyer. It's going to be voted on in committee this week and voted on the floor next week. The budget will then be on the floor the last week before the Easter work period.

Q Are you at all frustrated though that so much of your time is being spent with Iraq and so very little time is being spent on domestic priorities. You fired off a couple of Six for '06 items in the first 100 days. There's a lot you haven't dealt with and a lot that haven't gone anywhere. In theory, they are up to leadership to negotiate.

Are you at all frustrated you haven't gotten minimum wage, any further progress in student loans?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q And?

Mr. Hoyer. I would like to have passed them all by now. We are here in the House of Representatives where we have a system where you can consider things, with time constraints, and where we don't have 60 percent of the Members have to agree, although on almost every one of our Six for '06, as you know, we got 60 percent.

We averaged 62 Republicans added to the 233. There weren't obviously that many on every vote but we had 60 percent.

In the Senate, that's not the case, therefore they haven't moved them. I'm frustrated by it, yes. I cannot understand why anybody would want to trap hard working people in the richest country on the face of the earth working 40 hours a week in a framework of 1997 wages.

Q Isn't that an impasse?

Mr. Hoyer. So it's frustrating. The energy bill. I think the student loan bill has overwhelming votes I'm sure in the Senate as it did here. We got 124 votes on the Republican side of the aisle on that. We'd like to see it move.

Let me reiterate what I keep reiterating, we have now been in session, today is the what, 13th of March. You know, in many Congresses, we didn't do anything in January. One of the things we have done is we did so much in January and February in dealing with the Six for '06, the CR in

particular, and other items that we did a lot of work and then it hit sort of a slowdown in the United States Senate. That is not either surprising or unusual because the Senate works thoughtfully, as they would say.

Q On the U.S. attorney probe.

Mr. Hoyer. I think this is another example, a stark example of the Republican leadership, whether we talk about the Schiavo case or changing jurisdiction that courts have, of the Republican administration and Republican congressional leadership of trying to interpose its views in the judicial process, in the legal process.

This is another stark example where they wanted to use the judicial process, in this case, the prosecutorial process for political ins, and when those U.S. attorneys apparently did not cooperate, they were then fired. We are going to be doing substantial work on that, as the committees are doing right now.

Q That's my question.

Mr. Hoyer. Now, we find of course this emanated from the White House, now that these papers have been disclosed, which was not initially disclosed.

Q What would you do if Karl Rove cites executive privilege when he's subpoenaed?

Mr. Hoyer. I'll have to make that decision when he does that. We'll have to talk to the committee Chair as to

what he wants to do and the situation we find ourselves in. I, first of all, I don't have enough knowledge right now to give you an informed view on that, but certainly we will discuss that. Thank you all very much.

[Whereupon, at 11:31 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]