

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

\*\*\*

Tuesday, March 20, 2007

11:33 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Morning.

Q Good morning.

Mr. Hoyer. I made it. That was a great response.

Q We weren't expecting you on time.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning, class.

Q Good morning, Mr. Hoyer.

Mr. Hoyer. This is a wonderful start of a wonderful day.

Q If only everyone in your party were as submissive as this group.

Mr. Hoyer. I'm going to leave that alone.

The floor schedule, which you probably already know, I will go through it quickly. Go in at 10:30 for morning hour, 12:00 for legislative business. We will consider one bill under suspension of the rules and also consider H.R. 1227 under a rule, the Gulf Coast Hurricane Housing Recovery Act. This is obviously our continuing effort, which is present in the supplemental, which has been present in other pieces of legislation, to address the continuing dire situation that exists on the Gulf Coast.

We expect the last votes today 6:00 or 7:00 p.m.

On Wednesday, we will come in at 10:00, consider nine bills under suspension, three of those on veterans: a bill to reduce the incidence of suicide, disability compensation

and on increases for veterans payments; and two bills on phone "spoofing," they call it, and caller ID, which have been considered before and have not yet passed in the Congress.

Thursday, we will meet at 10:00; and we will consider the U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health and Iraq Accountability Act under a rule. I hesitate to say this, but, class, we will have a test on Friday that all of you will have to repeat the title of our bill on a regular basis: U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health and Iraq Accountability Act.

Friday, we will meet at 9:00 to do the D.C. voting rights bill.

On the Iraq supplemental, let me start with that. All of you, I'm sure, have seen the Iraq Study Group report, have read it. I want to read the first line -- the first paragraph and the third paragraph, the letter from Mr. Baker and Mr. Hamilton.

"First of all, there is no magic formula to solve the problems of Iraq." We all agree on that.

"Secondly, there is no one can guarantee that any course of action in Iraq at this point will stop sectarian warfare, growing violence or a slide toward chaos." Mr. Putnam said they could give the answer to what the right policy was to before supper. We don't believe that is the

case. We have been working on this hard. The committee has now reported out a bill 36 to 28 largely along -- almost exclusively along party lines. I think that is unfortunate.

The American public want a change. The American public thinks the policies we are pursuing have not worked. We are now 4 years into this effort. We're in the fifth year as of yesterday. We have crafted a responsible bill, a balanced bill that seeks to move us in a new direction. It is not precipitous. It does not adversely affect the authority or ability of General Petraeus or any of those under his command to exercise tactics and strategy that they believe will best guarantee success for our objectives and the safety of our troops. Period.

Anybody who says this micromanages is dead flat wrong. However, the Constitution of the United States gives to the Congress the duty -- not just the authority but the duty to exercise its best judgment as it relates to policy questions in terms of declaring war and of ending war and of how best we ought to proceed. Not on the ground. That's up to the commanders on the ground. But the policies that they are implementing and they are pursuing is the Congress' to make, notwithstanding this President's continuing assertion that the Congress' responsibility is to do what he says. That's what he means by "no strings attached." He did not want any constraints legislatively on his ability to do whatever he

deems appropriate. That is not what the Founding Fathers had in mind, that is not what the Constitution says, and that is not what the American people hoped would happen when they voted November 7th for a new direction.

Many Republicans have indicated that this is the President's last chance, obviously setting their own time line of the so-called surge not prevailing. Some of them have said 3 months, some have said 6 months, but all of them have said that there is a time in which success is not being accomplished, that we think we ought to move.

Now, we have handed you a paper which I hope you take the opportunity -- we have done a little research for you -- which I think is a very important piece of paper for all who will be voting on Thursday or Friday on this bill. The only reason I say Friday, debate may go over. We are not sure exactly how long debate will take. In any event, this is an important piece of paper. We are handing it to our Members. I would like to see the Republicans see this paper as well.

It relates the Bosnia war to this war in the sense of the Congress taking responsibility for policy. On December 15th, 1997, President Clinton was required to report to Congress on political and military conditions in Bosnia. By June 30th, 1998, all troops had to be withdrawn under an amendment offered by Steve Buyer of Indiana, then and now a Republican Leader in the Congress of the United States.

When that was voted on on June 24th, 1997, which set a timetable and date certain for withdrawal, Mr. Boehner voted for it, Mr. Blunt voted for it, Mr. Hastert voted for it, Mr. Hunter voted for it, and Mr. Hyde, the then chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, voted for it.

So that in setting time frames and date certain the Republican leadership in Bosnia -- where we lost not a single person, where we spent \$7 billion, as opposed to \$379 billion, where we had been there for 18 months, as opposed to 48 months -- notwithstanding that, all of those Republican Leaders voted to set a time limit. We stopped the genocide, Serbia was an operating democracy, and Milosevic was in the dock.

Steven Buyer said this: The civilian leadership in the region and international community in general have failed to make sufficient progress on reconstruction and reconciliation. The time is near for the United States to withdraw its ground forces from the region. And he offered an amendment requiring the administration to do just that.

David Hobson, the chairman of the Military Construction Committee said, we have done the military job. The longer they think we are going to stay there, the less they are going to move on the civil side.

Does that sound relevant to the debate today?

Hobson went on: That is why we need to set a date

certain and get our troops out, get them home, let the people of the area get on with their lives, hopefully -- not a guarantee -- in a peaceful fashion.

You turn the page over, Cliff Stearns quotes a good quote as well. I don't want to prolong it too much before you have questions. But the then chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee said, the International Relations Committee Ben Gilman said: None of us should have any doubt that the President may have to renege on the second deadline just as he did on the first unless we step in and hold him to his word. He believed that the Congress had the responsibility to act.

Then, lastly, Floyd Spence, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee said this: Today's vote will call for the withdrawal of U.S. ground troops from a peacekeeping operation of growing expense, \$7 billion, and seemingly unending duration.

This is Floyd Spence, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee for the Republican Party.

The time is long overdue for Congress to express its will on behalf of the American people. It is important that the Clinton administration be held accountable for the Nation's foreign policy and, in this case, for Bosnia policy. And he voted for the Buyer amendment, setting a time frame of 12 months for withdrawal. The time frame

under our bill, of course, can be 18 months if we are succeeding in our effort.

Secondly, and lastly, let me refer briefly to the budget that will be offered next week, going to be marked up by Mr. Spratt this week. It is important to note where we stand as a result of the fiscal policies of this administration.

We have gone from the surplus that you know about, the \$5.6 billion, to the \$3-plus trillion deficit. When the Bush administration's assumptions about the future are taken into account, the CBO has estimated the deficit in 2012 to be \$262 billion. That is the Congressional Budget Office.

Our budget will be balanced by 2012. It will have deficits lower than the administration in fiscal year '08 and fiscal year '12 and the total 5-year period. It applies PAYGO, SCHIP, higher education reauthorization, and renewable energy legislation, more investment for America's priorities, including health care, education and law enforcement, and rejects the President's unwise cuts.

So we believe that the budget we will offer is responsible in terms of its investment, responsible in terms of its budget reduction, and we are hopeful that that will pass next week. We believe it will pass through committee this week.

Q Mr. Hoyer?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes?

Q We are hearing all kinds of things about whether you have the votes or don't have votes. You are 12 away; and then you say, well, we really have the votes we need. Can you give us a realistic assessment at this point -- and I know you are not the whip, but you have been the whip -- can you give us a sense of Mr. Clyburn, have you talked to him? Do you have the votes or not? And if you don't have the votes, will you pull the bill?

Mr. Hoyer. If you are asking me, do I have 218 people that I know are definite yeses right this minute, the answer to that is no. That's not a surprise to you or to anybody in this room.

If you are asking me, do I think we will have 218 votes on this bill when we call it up for a vote, the answer to that is yes.

If you are asking me, do I think we will need to delay it, I hope the answer to that is no and believe it is no.

Q Mr. Hoyer, on the D.C. vote bill, the White House has come out opposing the legislation; and two Republican Senators are expected to sort of lead the charge in the Senate expressing that. Do you think this will pass the House on Friday only to die in the Senate?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know what will happen in the Senate. I think it will pass the House. I would hope it

would pass. It is going to pass with a bipartisan vote.

As a matter of fact, one of the most significant leaders in the Republican party is the cosponsor of this piece of legislation, Tom Davis. It passed out of his committee, led by Republicans, with a majority of Republicans voting for it the last time. The majority who were voting -- I'm not sure the exact vote, but the majority of the Republicans who were voting in the committee voted for it.

The legislation I think is defense of democracy. It is granting to 600,000-plus citizens of the United States of America the right to have a full voting representative of the Congress of the United States. It is my belief that we're the only democracy in the world whose citizens of its capital are not represented by at least one full representative in its parliament. That is a situation that ought not to be allowed to continue. Mr. Davis wants to turn that around. I want to turn that around. Speaker Pelosi wants to turn that around. We want to give to the elected delegate full representative status and a full vote in the Congress of the United States.

I would hope that the Senate would follow suit. This legislation, obviously, gives to Utah an additional member as well. Historically, the pattern is having -- when Alaska and Hawaii were given statehood, the premise was that Alaska

would be a Democratic State and Hawaii would be a Republican State and therefore they could feel comfortable with it. As all of you know, the opposite is the case. But, nevertheless, the premise was that you would have a balance.

The premise clearly is that Mrs. Norton would be the representative and a Republican would probably be elected in Utah.

Q Mr. Leader, are you concerned, or is the leadership in general concerned, that the whip organization right now includes one deputy whip, who is actively working against your bill, the chief deputy whip, who is undecided, and the deputy whip, who is a blue dog who is also undecided. Three members of the whip team who are not only not working on behalf of the bill but at least one of them is working against it.

Mr. Hoyer. I would prefer that all the people in leadership were working for this bill.

As I said earlier, I think we are going to have the 218. I think it is going to be a bipartisan vote. I think we will get some Republicans. I think the Republicans are working this very hard because they have great difficulty getting out of the rubber stamp psychology, which is what Mr. Putnam indicated. They are banding together, in my opinion. That's why I read these quotes. There is no Republican reason to be against this bill that is being

offered on the floor, other than wanting to rubber-stamp the President.

The American public overwhelmingly supports this bill. They want a change in policy. And I think it will be a very unfortunate if a large number of Republicans don't vote for this bill because they will not be representing their people. I would also hope that every Democrat would vote for it.

Q What amendments do you see on the floor?

Mr. Hoyer. We are discussing that, and I am not going to second-guess what amendments we are going to have on the floor at this point in time.

Q But it will not be a closed rule?

Mr. Hoyer. There have been 15 supplementals, as I recall. There were 7 out of 15 that were modified open rules, 8 that were not. So the majority of rules passed under this Congress over the last 6 years' supplementals have been either closed or -- I don't know whether they were fully closed but structured rules. So that the majority of the rules that they passed last time were not open rules, the last time being the last 6 years.

Q Mr. Leader, this bill has an emergency designation and includes items like relief for spinach growers, live fish, peanut storage. Will these items become paid for by the PAYGO rules endorsed by the House Democrats at the

beginning of this year?

And, second of all, if not or in any case, why should these items be on an emergency war spending bill?

Mr. Hoyer. This is an emergency war spending bill primarily, as you know. Plus the fact -- and we have put in everything the President has asked for to ensure that the troops are supplied, equipped appropriately and have the resources that they need to prosecute the effort as long as they are asked to carry on that effort in Iraq or Afghanistan. In fact, we add additional money for Afghanistan where we believe the real war on terror exists and that we need to succeed in Afghanistan. There is not a division on that question, I think.

The Republicans, however, left much work undone. The BRAC funding, for instance, is in this bill. We think that is totally appropriate. BRAC needs to go forward, and we think our national security requires that BRAC go forward.

Our veterans' health is underfunded and needs to be funded properly. The funding for the troops that come back obviously has been inadequate to ensure their proper treatment. Walter Reed shows that. The negligence under the Republican watch was stark and needs to be corrected. Those three items.

Katrina funding, that is included in this supplemental bill. Clearly, the administration has not done what needs

to be done for Katrina. One only has to visit the gulf coast to understand that. The levees, there is levee money in here that is necessary.

A Republican lieutenant governor, but I think reflecting what many Republicans believe around this country, North Dakota's Republican Lieutenant Governor Jack Dalrymple said this in talking about the agricultural assistance that is in this bill, \$3.9 billion: What it is about is the impact on the economy for our entire region. When you come down to the human level, there is no question there are farmers meeting with their bankers right now on whether or not they can farm this year. Whether or not they can farm this year is dependent upon whether this program is approved.

That's a Republican. So we don't think this is partisan. We think there is going to be a lot of Republicans. As a matter of fact, a lot of Republicans who have supported the spinach program that you mentioned, where the spinach farmers they had the recall because of the problem with spinach that put an awful lot of people in a crisis situation.

While these numbers are relatively small, they are an emergency, we believe. Manhattan fisheries also in the same -- which was authorized, by the way, in the 109th Congress under Republican rule.

So this is not a question of either individual projects -- these are people who have found themselves in trouble, and we think this bill is an appropriate vehicle to fund that. One ought to focus on the overwhelming part of this bill that deals with our national security, including the ad-ons like the BRAC, like the veterans' health, like the Afghanistan money. The ad-ons are largely devoted to -- and the bill is almost entirely for -- our national security. But there are some emergency matters in there that we thought ought to be addressed.

Q Mr. Leader, does your budget do anything to rein in growth in Federal entitlement spending beyond what is necessary to pay for SCHIP?

Mr. Hoyer. The supplemental?

Q No, the budget. Do you do anything to slow the rate of growth in entitlement spending beyond what is necessary to fund SCHIP?

Mr. Hoyer. They are marking up the bill. I don't have the specific answer to that question. My guess is no, but I don't want to stand on that answer, because I'm not sure of that.

Q Why wouldn't you? Wouldn't this be the time to do it?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, whether this is the time to do it, when we took over in 1993 from the Bush administration, the

previous year there was a \$292 billion operating deficit, as you know. We had run up very large deficits, and the projection was large deficits for the foreseeable future.

It took us 4 years -- fiscal years '94 through '98 -- to bring balance in -- excuse me, '98, '99, '00 and '01 got into surplus. But it took us 4 years to get there. You can't get there overnight responsibly. So this will put us on a path to getting there.

Q Mr. Hoyer, are you offering any assurances to Republicans about when they might get the kind of open rule they say you promised, if not on the supplemental?

Mr. Hoyer. There have been a number of open rules already. There -- as a matter of fact, there is an open rule. The Katrina bill is a modified bill, the amendments to the bill. I am not sure it is open or not. Mr. Frank has had open rules, and others have had open rules. So we have had open rules. We have more open rules in this Congress than they had in the last Congress, and we have only been in session for 2-1/2 months.

Q Would you allow them to offer a substitute on the supplemental?

Mr. Hoyer. I think the Republicans will be offered an opportunity to offer -- I have said that before -- but I think either a motion or a substitute, certainly a motion to recommit.

Let me say something about the motion to recommit. One of the papers -- I don't know whether it was Roll Call or the Hill --

Q That was me.

Mr. Hoyer. That was you? About these motions to recommit, these motions to recommit could have been simple amendments if they were noncontroversial. And they were "gotcha" amendments, as I think somebody -- Alan Mollohan's quote is absolutely right, and they are of little or no substance.

The last one dealing with military advisors, recruiters on campus as the others were tacked onto bills that didn't deal with that, I supported that. I support that policy, voted for that when we considered it numerous times on the floor of the House. These are not substantive --

Let me give you the perfect example. On a bill that dealt with a reauthorization of something that under the 12 years of Republican leadership had not been reauthorized, to make sure that our water was clean and that communities had resources for their water treatment plants' expansion, or new, on a reauthorization bill, did they deal with any of that? They did not. They didn't even touch it. They dealt with the funding of saying that those committed of traitorous acts or acts of violence in committing terrorism would not be able to get a licensure on a maritime ship.

That was a gotcha amendment. We are not going to play that game with them. When there are substantive amendments, we will debate them as substantive amendments.

Q Mr. Hoyer, you don't deny that some of these extra items in the spending bill are there to encourage every last person you can get to get 218, do you?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't deny?

Q Some of those extra items that are in the spending bill are designed to get to 218; yes or no?

Mr. Hoyer. Clearly -- clearly, those items are designed to respond to the concerns of Members; and to the extent that their inclusion encourages those members to vote for the bill --

Let's take a specific example. Many people -- Colin Peterson is the chairman of the committee. I think Colin Peterson, frankly, would vote for this bill with or without that in there, but he was very strongly urging that that matter be included because it is an emergency, as the Lieutenant Governor of North Dakota, a Republican, states it is.

So, you know, I think these items are justified on their own merit; and to the extent that people are supportive of them, it encourages them to vote for the bill. Certainly --

Q [Inaudible.]

Mr. Hoyer. Excuse me?

Q [Inaudible.]

Mr. Hoyer. These are all emergencies.

[Whereupon, at 12:00 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]