

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

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Tuesday, April 17, 2007

11:31 a.m.

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

Obviously, the country is traumatized and shocked and very saddened by the events at Virginia Tech. As I am sure some of you know, another young woman -- student died just, apparently I don't know whether minutes ago or hours ago. So I think the toll is now up to 33 or 34 people who were killed, professors and students on the campus of Virginia Tech. We all share the sadness of the parents and of all of the students and indeed, students throughout the country and college professors and parents, wherever there are students in school. And now obviously, wondering whether it can happen here. As with Columbine, every parent who had a child in high school or in junior high school shared that concern.

Our prayers and sympathies go out to the parents and to the students. Clearly, an extraordinarily traumatic experience for young people to lose their classmates. I have someone who is very close to me who was a student at Virginia Tech, and is not on campus this semester, but -- so I have -- my granddaughter has been on the campus of Virginia Tech frequently last year. So it has a personal focus of mine. But I know we had a moment of silence last night, and we will have a resolution that Mr. Boucher, in whose district Virginia Tech resides, will be offering

probably tomorrow.

As some of you know, many Members are down -- are going down or have already left for the convocation that is to be held, and the President will be speaking this afternoon. I am sure he will express the sentiments of us all and our deep sadness. We don't know enough. The young man has apparently been identified as the perpetrator of this event, but we don't know much more than that. We will have to find out.

The floor schedule for this week, we have suspension bills. We have a large number of suspension bills on the floor, including the Taxpayer Protection Act on the suspension calendar today. Votes will be rolled until 5:00 today to accommodate those who are attending the convocation in Virginia, Virginia Tech in Blacksburg. Tomorrow we will have the Recover Act, which deals with the disaster response plan of the SBA, Small Business Administration arising out of the failures to respond as quickly or as effectively as I think we all would have liked in Katrina and in other disasters.

On Wednesday as well, we will be considering the shareholder vote on executive compensation, that is notification, as you know, of executive compensation plans and includes also buy-out plans or golden parachute plans. The shareholders would have notice, would be able to

comment, would not be able to stop under this bill. But we will also at -- we are discussing, as well, the appointment of conferees on the Iraq supplemental. We have not decided exactly when that is going to come. We have a meeting with the President, as you know, tomorrow, and I am sure that we will have some discussions regarding where the next steps on the stuff we need to pass the conference committee and get that to the President. On Thursday, we will consider the D.C. voting rights bill and the Water Resources Development Act. If we --

Let me back up, if we do not complete the executive compensation, that will be rolled until Friday. Not rolled, but recessed on that bill and continue it and complete it on Friday, executive compensation. On Thursday, we will do the water bill, the Water Resources Development Act under rule and the D.C. voting rights bill. That will be the week. Friday, as I say, we will complete the executive compensation.

During the break, I took a CODEL to Sudan to Egypt and to Germany. And also to Greece. We flew in the first night, landed in Greece and then went into Darfur. But we spent the night in Greece. We had dinner with the foreign minister, Dora Bakoyannis, and we then went to Darfur. We spent three days in Darfur -- not Darfur in Sudan.

We spent the first day in South Sudan, which is led by

President Keer, who is also vice president of Sudan as a result of the comprehensive peace agreement that was reached. We talked to President Keer and members of his cabinet in South Sudan about what was happening vis-a-vis South Sudan, and also what was happening from their perspective in Darfur. President Keer informed us that he was going to convene later this month and a meeting of the rebel groups, at least invite all the rebel groups in Darfur to a meeting. We thought that was a positive sign, the results of which would be hopefully an agreement among the various rebel groups to cease and desist from acts which are taking large numbers of lives and creating great numbers of displaced persons.

The next day we went to Darfur itself and went to al-Fashir, flew in on a world food committee plane with our 11 members. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen was the ranking Republican on the delegation. She is also the ranking Republican, as all of you know, of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We toured Darfur, we toured a medical facility. We went to a displaced-person camp. We met with the head, the commanding general of AMIS, which is the African military African mission in Sudan. 5,800 people, clearly not enough. Needs to be four times larger than that.

We then met with the young colonel who went through the mission of the African Union mission in Sudan, and he

reiterated that they had some 5,800 people to do what essentially they needed over 20,000 people to do. He also indicated that they were not getting the kind of cooperation. And in fact, the Sudanese government was impeding their activities.

The last day we spent in Khartoum we met with a number of NGOs, including Save the Children, including the AID administrator aide and a number of other humanitarian groups who complained about the impediments being posed by the Sudanese government in terms of obtaining visas, cost of visas and the ability to move around the country to deliver humanitarian services. The next day we met with President Mubarak in Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt and brought to his attention what we had learned in Sudan and urged him to play a more active role or an active role in achieving the ability of the NGOs to operate and an agreement by the Bashir government to the U.N. plan of having a hybrid force in the neighborhood of 20,000-plus people, which Bashir had originally opposed.

I was very heartened to see an article in The New York Times today, which indicates that the Bashir government has, in fact, indicated that it would cooperate with such a U.N. African Union force. President Mubarak had said he would call President Bashir and urge him to do that as well as to cooperate with NGOs. Ambassador Fahmy of Egypt here in the

United States called me last week. I think it was Wednesday, it may have been Thursday. I had been back a couple days and told me that, in fact, President Mubarak wanted me to know that he had made the telephone call that we asked him to make. I don't know what role, if any, it played. I talked to Mr. Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State, before he left about our trip, what our findings had been, talked to him about both of these things.

He, as all of you know, this last weekend was there. So I am heartened that the action that has been taken by the Bashir government that we wanted, whether it was taken because we were there, Negroponte was there, obviously, the Secretary General of the United Nations has also been urging that. But hopefully, the combined efforts made a difference.

Lastly, there is a lot of discussion about the supplemental. Clearly we are working on that. We are talking about it. The President has misrepresented the supplemental on a number of occasions in two very important ways.

First of all, he said that we are not supporting the troops. In fact, as all of you know, all of the resources the President asked for for the troops is included in the supplemental passed in both the House and the Senate. Secondly, the President indicates that we are micromanaging

the war. That is absolutely untrue. There is nothing in the bill which in any way undermines the ability of General Petraeus or any of the commanders in the field at whatever level to take such action as they deem appropriate and necessary to achieve the success of their mission, period. What there is in the bill is a referencing of the presidentially announced benchmarks for performance of the Iraqi government. I am not going to go through that litany, but you know them. And we have said that the President needs to provide a progress report on whether they have been accomplished. And depending upon the success of the Iraqis, it would be the judgment of the Congress that we ought to take our people out of the major responsibility to affect the ends we seek when we know that General Petraeus, Baker-Hamilton, numerous other former commanders in the field have all indicated this cannot be solved militarily and must be solved politically.

What the supplemental seeks is to take U.S. forces out of harm's way and place the responsibility for that political resolution foursquare on the Iraqis where we think it belongs and where we think the overwhelming majority of the American people believes it belongs.

So with that, let me close. As I said, I want to emphasize the District of Columbia bill to provide the very basic right of United States citizens and that is a right to

have a voting representative in the Congress of the United States. The District of Columbia, I said on the floor, is the successor of my State. Maryland donated to the Federal Government the land on which the District of Columbia resides. Virginia donated some land as well, but that was given back to Virginia, as you know. So all of the citizens in the District of Columbia, successor citizens, are successors to citizens of the several States.

Tom Davis and Eleanor Holmes Norton are cosponsors. Tom Davis reported this out of committee with a bipartisan vote and an assertion that had this could be done by legislation under the Constitution and that, in fact, what we are doing is constitutional. I would hope that we will get significant Republican support. I know that Mr. Kemp has indicated to me he has talked to a lot of people about this. Jack Kemp, he and I talked about it last week, last Friday I believe it was, and I am hopeful that we will get significant Republican support. We will get overwhelming, perhaps unanimous, I think unanimous democratic support. Okay.

Q Mr. Leader, after Columbine, there was a lot of talk, a lot of talk in Congress about some kind of anti-crime or gun control legislation. Nothing ever came of it. In fact, the only legislation that was passed since then have been bills to roll back or allow gun control

measures to lapse. I am wondering your thoughts on whether this Congress, in the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings, will be moving some kind of crime legislation?

Mr. Hoyer. I think the country and the Congress will have additional discussions, as is always the case after an incident, particularly one of this scope and tragic consequence. But right now we are focused on the tragedy itself. We will get to the consequences.

Q You mentioned that there was another casualty while you were speaking. I e-mailed my desk, and they are unaware of it. I am just wondering where you heard that.

Mr. Hoyer. Apparently. I saw this on CNN.

Q So you haven't heard it from another source? Because that is what they were saying.

Mr. Hoyer. CNN is reporting --

Q She had already been counted as one of the dead.

Mr. Hoyer. Okay. So it was not additional. They were reporting that a parent had just indicated that his child had died. But apparently it was already in the numbers.

Q In the moments -- in just the hours after we learned what happened yesterday, gun activists were already sending out flurries of e-mails, saying that gun control would not help the situation and so on. Can you describe some of the political pitfalls here?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to get into the debate with

reference to what we need to do less than 24 hours or approximately 24 hours after this incident has occurred. I think we need to focus on the students, the families, the tragedy. And yes, will there be, as I have said, discussions, as there properly ought to be, about what we can do to preclude this happening again? As there were after Columbine, there is not action. I think it is a time to --

Q Congressman, many are arguing there ought to be a debate, there ought to be legislation, that it is clear --

Mr. Hoyer. Yeah. I am not saying there ought not to be debate or discussion or legislation. I am saying that I am not going to discuss it today because I think today we ought to focus on helping those who have suffered personally this tragedy. Clearly there will be a political debate which ought to occur and will occur as to whether or not there is some action we can take.

What you have indicated is that there are already some saying, this didn't have any -- the lack or presence of gun control legislation would have had no effect on it. Obviously a number of us disagree on that. But I am not going to get into that debate at this point.

Q Can you talk about what you plan to do differently this Thursday in order to try to pass the D.C. vote bill?

Mr. Hoyer. Let me say on the D.C. vote bill, I

continue to focus on but I don't really see it reported. The amendment that they sought to offer was not the problem. The problem was, in their motion, they killed the bill because they referred it not to be recommitted and reported back forthwith, which is the language that usually is used in a motion to recommit, which simply says, whether you adopt -- if you adopt this amendment, it is immediately added to the bill, reported back, and you vote on the passage of the bill with the amendment included. The bill -- what they said was reported back promptly. The net effect of that is killing the bill. We hoped not to be in that position.

Again, and I will tell you further that it will be the intention of our caucus leadership, me, Nancy, the Speaker, and others to ask Members to vote against such rules, such a motions to recommit in the future on the basis of process, not substance. As opposed to a motion to recommit, which is, in effect, in the form of an amendment.

Q But in this case, how can you get around that whole --

Mr. Hoyer. Ah-hah. Well, we are trying to do that, and we think we are going to have some success.

Q Mr. Leader, do you think it will be harder for them to try to attach this sort of motion to recommit that dealt with guns in D.C. at this point after what has happened out

of Virginia Tech?

Mr. Hoyer. I would think. I would hope.

Q Mr. Hoyer, clarify on the question, it sounds as if what you are saying is that the Democratic leadership does plan to pursue new gun control legislation. But if you don't want to discuss it today, is that a fair characterization?

Mr. Hoyer. The second is.

Q What about the first part?

Mr. Hoyer. I am not discussing it, I don't want to get into the first part. What I said was it was a reasonable expectation as has happened after every one of these instances that the country, not just the Congress, the country will debate how can we stop our children from being slaughtered most effectively? This is essentially -- this is the, as I understand it, the largest single incident of a massacre, as it is being called, in America's history. More so than the Texas Tower event or Columbine. It is a very tragic event. All I am saying is that my expectation is there will be a debate. I am not going to enter into the debate today.

Q Are you meeting with Carolyn McCarthy today? Are you meeting with her? Carolyn McCarthy is seeking meetings with leadership today. Are you going to be meeting with her?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know. If I am, I haven't looked at the amended schedule. My present schedule doesn't have Carolyn McCarthy on it. I would certainly be glad to talk to Carolyn McCarthy if she wants to.

Q Mr. Leader, it has been commonly assumed that the House language is going to be removed after a veto or significantly watered down. What about the prospect of simply getting the bill to the President's desk or to the Senate, or even out of conference, where there are some opponents to the House timeline or to that kind of strong language? I mean, do you expect to have to water it down to simply get it to the President's desk?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to anticipate what the conferees are going to do, but conferences are about bridging the differences. Obviously the Senate bill did not have a -- it had a timeline in the sense that there was a hope, but there was no language making that happen in the Senate. In the House bill, obviously, there is a date certain set.

Q Can you personally support a conference report that has the Senate -- language like the Senate language?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to anticipate what the conferees are going to do. But what I can say from my position, my perspective is, that it is important for us to pass legislation to -- and we have indicated we want to

support the troops. This bill, in fact, fully supports the troops. It does not undermine the flexibility of our commanders. We would hope that when this bill gets to the President, he will sign the bill as it comes out of conference. We are going to talk to him on Wednesday I am sure about that prospect.

Let me say something that also is relevant I think. There have been six supplemental bills from 2001 to 2006 dealing with this issue, the first on October 17, very limited bill, 85 days after it was submitted on October 17, which is to say at the height of the concern regarding 9/11, took 85 days to do that bill. Last year's bill took 119 days to pass supplemental. Now, the President has made an amendment to his supplemental request in mid-March, which means we are essentially 38 days after, in effect, his complete supplemental has been requested or 70-plus days, if you count the first submission. So in this respect, we are not at an unusually long time. Also, we went through Germany on our -- which back in our trip and went to Landstuhl to the hospital facility.

Mr. Woodruff was at that hospital. Everybody knows about it. It is an extraordinary facility. They have done extraordinary work. The people there are incredibly committed. But one of the things we also did, we talked to General Speer and to General Ward, who are with the Army in

Europe. General Ward is Deputy of European Command, and General Speer is Deputy of the Army in Europe. We asked them about how soon did they think funding was needed, and they certainly thought that funding was needed be within the next 2 to 3 months and that they hoped that funding would pass within that time frame. That did not mean that they had excess funds available but that funds would be shifted, as they have been in the past, to specific items for Iraq, as opposed to specific items which could be delayed in some other part of their budget.

So contrary to the President's assertion that at the end of this month, the Army is going to run out of money, that is not true. Secondly, this administration has determined that it is going to fight this war in supplementals as opposed to fighting it in the regular bill. They have always under-requested in the regular bill. Of course, they thought this war was going to cost \$60 billion. The end of this year it is going to be \$600 billion.

Q I was wondering how the budget talks are going?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, the conference hasn't been appointed yet. Budget talks are proceeding. There are obviously differences in the Senate and House bills. As you know, Mr. Spratt and Mr. Conrad have worked very closely together. In forging these budgets, have worked very closely together, over the years on budget matters, and are very compatible

with one another, and I think are two of our most able members. They are working on trying to work out the difference between the budget, and we very much want to pass a budget plan, and we want to do that as quickly as possible.

Obviously, there are differences on the tax cut extensions. PAYGO needs to be resolved paying for SCHIP. The House has a \$50 billion, as you know, reserve fund. The Senate broke it up into three parts, so that has got to be resolved. Nondiscretionary spending levels are lower in the Senate, higher in the House. That has to be resolved. And there are some reconciliation instructions for the Education and Labor Committee dealing with student loans that need to be resolved. There may be other matters that are under discussion as well, but we hope to see a conference appointed and proceed in the near term.

Q D.C. voting rights, just for a second. Explain again, what is the big deal? You get all your Members to vote against the motion to recommit you kill it, the bill passes?

Mr. Hoyer. No big deal.

Q Maneuvering and the worry and the concern. What am I missing?

Mr. Hoyer. Did you miss it? What I said was, the only consternation about the Republicans' last motion was the

motion to recommit. What the Republican strategy was, not to deal with the substantive bill as has been so often in their motion to recommit. They haven't dealt with the substance of the bills. They have dealt with a political question. Here what they wanted to do was kill the D.C. bill by theoretically aiding legislation, which referenced the D.C. gun law and the court's decision with reference to that law. That had nothing to do with D.C. voting in the Congress of the United States. It had everything to do with their thinking that they could get votes for their motion to recommit.

A problem with their motion to recommit was, whether they had gotten those votes or not, we would have passed the bill and dropped the provision in conference. I have said that, you have heard me say that time and time again. But it was not a motion to recommit and report back forthwith. It was a motion to do it promptly, which is effectively a motion to table by another name. The bill is killed.

Q Thanks. So given what happened at Virginia Tech, do you think it is much harder to support that amendment today?

Mr. Hoyer. I answered yes.

Q Sorry. I didn't know that. The implication was that at that point you thought that the Democrats would set -- at least some Democrats were going to vote for that motion to recommit?

Mr. Hoyer. Oh, at that point, I am not thinking the answer is yes. I think they would have --

Q Last question.

Mr. Hoyer. -- as they have in the past.

Q Can I just follow up on the supplemental?

Mr. Hoyer. Who hasn't had a question? You haven't had a question.

Q You had said look at the rules in PAYGO, you found that allowed that motion vote bill. Do you still want to go back and revisit the PAYGO?

Mr. Hoyer. We are revisiting the issue. I have been in a legislative body a long time, and I was president of the Senate for 4 years in Maryland. Germaneness is an important issue in my opinion in any legislative body, but particularly in the House with 435 people. And what germaneness essentially says is, you have got to offer amendments that are relevant to the bill that is being and the subject that is being considered. When you add PAYGO, it substantially broadens the relevance issue. The D.C. bill didn't have anything to do with guns. But we did have a PAYGO provision. And the parliamentarian says, under those circumstances, the precedent said that almost everything that deals with D.C. then becomes relevant or germane.

Now, very frankly, I think the Republicans have

certainly a right to a fair shot at impacting my motion to recommit, the substance matter that is being considered. But for instance on the water resources bill for sewage treatment plants and clean water bill, their motion dealt with the PAYGO provision, not the substance at hand. We want to get the budget deficit under control. We said fiscal responsibility was necessary. David Broder wrote a great column about John Spratt and about PAYGO and a return to fiscal discipline. We want to do that.

But we are not going to be hoisted on the petard of fiscal responsibility by having politically be pounded by putting an amendment which is nongermane from my perspective, not from the parliamentarian's but not relevant to D.C. voting with the hopes that some people will feel compelled to vote for that and therefore either kill the bill or add the amendment. Now, if they had added the amendment and that is all they had done, it would have gone forward, passed and we would have dropped it in conference. I have done that in the past. Haven't dropped it in conference because we haven't had that many conferences. You get my point. Is everybody understanding what I am saying?

Q Will you go to a PAYGO scorecard?

Mr. Hoyer. That is under consideration. That is certainly been discussed.

Q Thank you.

Mr. Hoyer. Thank you very much.

Q The conferees, why haven't they been appointed on the supplemental? The Senate appointed them before break. What is holding things up?

Mr. Hoyer. We just got back.

Q I know, but you have had all break. You had two weeks. The Senate appointed it before they left on their Easter break.

Mr. Hoyer. We couldn't have appointed them on the break.

Q You could have appointed it before the break.

Mr. Hoyer. Yes, we could have.

Q But why? Is this a more strategic move or tactical move or is there something more substantive holding things up?

Mr. Hoyer. I think it is more tactical than substantive. There is going to be -- you know -- Mr. Boehner, the tactic is --

[Whereupon, at 12:03 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]