

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,
STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, April 28, 2009

10:36 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. First of all, obviously tomorrow we note the first 100 days of the Obama administration -- a little longer for the 111th Congress. But the Obama administration and this Congress took office facing some of the largest challenges any President and Congress have faced in history -- certainly in my tenure since 1981 -- the greatest challenges confronting the Congress and a President. Indeed, as some of you have heard me say, I think this President probably confronted as great a crisis as any President perhaps since Abraham Lincoln. Roosevelt confronted an economic crisis, but didn't have an international crisis, as I said, until his second term -- starting with the latter part of the first term.

In the first 100 days, this President and this Congress have acted decisively to confront the challenges. We have started tackling the economic crisis. Major legislation has been signed into law -- the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, one of the most substantial pieces of legislation ever passed to respond to an economic crisis to try to get the economy moving and growing.

We passed the first bill the President signed, obviously, was the Children's Health Insurance, adding 4 million children to coverage under SCHIP. We passed the Lilly Ledbetter bill, which addressed a Supreme Court decision which effectively said to women: If you don't find out in the first 180 days you're being discriminated against, you're out of luck. That was neither the

intent of the law, nor do we think it was an appropriate determination of what the law was.

We passed a bill, the Serve America Act, the Kennedy bill, which expanded very substantially the involvement of volunteers in helping us work on meeting the questions of poverty and education and health care for our communities.

We established a special IG for the TARP program so that very substantial moneys that had been put forward by the taxpayers would be overseen effectively and we could find out where money was spent. If it was spent incorrectly, we would know that.

We passed an omnibus appropriations bill, completing the appropriations process of last year, which was stymied because we couldn't get a bipartisan agreement with the President on numbers that, now, given where we have been, look relatively small, but at the time, to President Bush, looked very big.

In addition, we passed and was signed by the President one of the largest land preservation bills in a very long time, certainly in 15 years, preserving millions of acres for public land. In addition, the House has passed a very substantial legislation -- the Helping Families Save Their Home Act, which tried to respond to the mortgage crisis.

FDA tobacco regulation, which we had passed in the last Congress, and we passed again, giving to the FDA the authority to oversee the use of tobacco, which obviously is a drug that has very substantial adverse impacts on the health of our people.

That bill is pending the Senate as is the Helping Families Save Their Home Act. And we passed the COPS Improvement Act, which reauthorized the COPS program and which expanded by some 50,000 the number of community policemen we would have on the streets.

This is, I think, the most active Congress that I have served in in the first 100 days. I don't mean that we haven't taken substantial actions in other Congresses in which I have served in the early days, but I don't think any Congress has, in my service, has acted so decisively in the first 100 days of an administration.

I think the President's leadership has been, as I said, decisive, it has also been thoughtful, and he has reached out to try to create bipartisanship, and he did so last week, again, in a bipartisan meeting we had at the White House.

I think it lays the groundwork for Obama's key initiatives of health care. Certainly, that is true in the Reinvestment Act, as well as the Omnibus Appropriation Act, as well was the Budget Act, which I hope to pass in the next couple of days.

We also address in all of those bills his priorities of not only health care, but energy and education. All of those bills deal with those priorities. And we are going to be pursuing those over the next months in this Congress.

And the budget moves us towards -- doesn't get us anywhere close; much work remains to be done -- but it gets us moving towards rebalancing, if you will, the fiscal posture of America.

The last President, in my opinion, oversaw the most fiscally irresponsible era perhaps in our history, in which we went deeply into debt; essentially, more than a \$10 trillion turnaround in our fiscal posture; an extraordinary amount of debt incurred, and a legacy that required, by everybody's recommendation, including the previous administration's Secretary of the Treasury and their appointee to the Federal Reserve, including what was recommended, very substantial further indebtedness required to meet the economic failures of the last administration.

Now let me go into floor actions. This week it is going to be a week in which we are considering to consider three major pieces of legislation. The budget conference report. As I said, I expect that up in the next day or so. I expect to see this pass within the next 30 hours.

This weekend I worked very closely with Mr. Spratt, the chairman of the Budget Committee; with Mr. Boyd, a member of the conference committee, and Ms. DeLauro, to reach an agreement so that we could meet the House's commitment and, we hope the Senate's commitment to, making PAYGO a reality -- statutory PAYGO a reality -- but adherence to the premise of PAYGO a reality.

Toward that end, the Speaker and I will be sending a letter to the conferees which indicates that we will not be considering legislation on the House floor unless statutory PAYGO is included in that legislation, statutory PAYGO has been adopted. There was a comma there you may have missed. Or, alternatively, that the

items dealing with the AMT and the SGR and doc reimbursement, estate tax, or the expiring tax cuts, are paid for.

So, again, three alternatives: Legislation has statutory PAYGO in it, statutory PAYGO has been adopted, or the legislation is paid for. Under those three circumstances, we will consider legislation. If one of those three criteria is not met, we won't be considering that legislation on the floor.

The Speaker and I will be making that clear to our own members and to members of the conference and to the other body.

The Blue Dogs have been working very hard. I have been in support of them, and as had the Speaker. I want to emphasize that the Speaker and I are both in agreement with the Blue Dogs that PAYGO -- the PAYGO premise included in our rules is something that we are very serious about and we think is essential if we are going to get back to a fiscally sound management of the national finances.

We will then go to the Hate Crimes Prevention Act tomorrow. We expect that to pass handily. We think that is a critical bill. We obviously passed hate crimes in previous Congresses. We are expanding the coverage to make it very clear that crimes committed against groups, which is different in character than a crime that is committed in the course of another crime -- an assault in the course of a robbery or murder in the course of a robbery -- but a crime committed because someone is a member of a group, whatever that group may be, is a crime of a different character and

effectively more dangerous in some respect to the community. We think, as I said, that that will pass handily.

I want to emphasize this bill does not deal with speech or opinion. It deals with actions; violent actions. It does not proscribe speech. It proscribes actions against groups based upon their membership in a particular group.

With respect to the credit card bill, which is the third major piece of legislation that we will be considering, I expect we may start debate on that tomorrow, but I expect to have a vote on that on Thursday. It bans retroactive interest rate increases, it bans double-cycle billing, it bans due-date gimmicks, and it requires earlier advanced notice of impending rate hikes.

I think Americans feel somewhat powerless when they are dealing with their credit card companies. I don't know about all of you, but I get a notice from my credit card company, it is written in type that only a 10-year old can read, I think, effectively. Older than that, the type is too small. It is four or five pages. I like to think I am reasonably bright. I got a law degree from Georgetown. I look at this paper, and I do not delude myself -- if I don't like the fourth paragraph and I call up my company and tell them, I don't like the fourth paragraph, take it out of there, and they are going to say, Okay. And I don't think any other consumer really believes they have the ability to do that. So they need protection from statuses or actions that clearly put them at great disadvantage.

So we will pass those three bills. It will be a major week. One hundred days. I think the President can be rightfully proud of major accomplishments, and the polls reflect that the American public agrees with that assessment, not only in terms of the President's number, but in terms of the numbers of Congress. The numbers of Congress are historically not particularly high, but they are certainly much higher than they were in December, an indication that the public believes both the President and the Congress are working towards solving the problems that confront them.

I took a long time. I apologize for that, but after 100 days, I had a lot to say.

Q On the budget, the Blue Dogs were wanting something that they thought would more better pressure the Senate into making sure that some of those items you outlined are paid for. So this letter doesn't seem to address that.

Mr. Hoyer. I think it does. And I think the Blue Dogs believe it does. I hope they think it does. It was done in conjunction with discussions with a number of them.

Again, let me reiterate what the Speaker and I are saying. We will not consider legislation that waives the Budget Act unless statutory PAYGO is included in that legislation, statutory PAYGO has already been adopted, or it's paid for. The Speaker and I have made a pledge we will not consider such legislation unless those three criteria are met.

I think that is pretty strong language. I think the Blue Dogs share that view. And I think that, hopefully, will justify their support.

Q The conference report, does that apply to any kind of conference report -- omnibus; anything, any kind of legislation?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes. But that already applies. In the budget, as you know, that we passed, that passed pretty handily with Democratic votes, we indicated that the baseline would be adjusted for the four items I referenced. The budget coming back -- that was subject to PAYGO passing the House first; if it passed the House first. This is really stronger, in some respects, not because of the language in the conference, but because of the premise that the Speaker and I put forward with reference to consideration of legislation.

So we think it is strong. We will deal with those four items. Any other items where PAYGO is not waived, will already be affected. For instance, tax extenders would already be affected under our present rule, so that is not an issue.

Q Mr. Leader, will you call on the administration to release the details of the CIA's bipartisan congressional briefings on its interrogation techniques, as well as a full list of who was briefed?

Mr. Hoyer. Intelligence Committee is looking at that. I want to talk to them about it. There are obviously some legitimate concerns the Intelligence Community has with respect to

what was in those documents that references not so much facts in terms of what happened and who was involved in that, but procedures and processes that they legitimately want to hold secret. So we are discussing that?

Q Would you call them to at least release the parts of the memos that would say waterboarding was discussed in the congressional briefings?

Mr. Hoyer. I want to stick with my answer that I am in discussions with the Intelligence Community about what is appropriate to do. I think we want to get to the bottom of the issue, but we don't want to do so in away that compromises our security.

Q The budget, you said you think it will pass within the next 30 hours. What is the likelihood that you would do it today?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think we will do it today, in terms of final passage. Let me tell you why. I have indicated on the floor that I was going to make sure that we gave 24 hours notice, and it was filed at 11:57 last night. And I want to keep that promise.

I don't know that it was a promise. Let me reclaim the word "promise" because I don't think it was a promise, but a representation that I would do that. And I want to do it.

Q Sir, have you discussed the ongoing swine flu with any members of the Obama administration, and how confident are you that the Federal Government is prepared to respond to an

emergency?

Mr. Hoyer. The Speaker and I had a conference call with Secretary Napolitano yesterday around 5, 5:30. She discussed extensively what actions had been taken, were being taken. The Speaker and I both represented if there was anything further she thought we ought to do at this point in time as a Congress, she would do so. Her indication was at that time she thought everything was being done that needed to be done.

As you know, she and I guess the acting head of CDC had a briefing yesterday. I forget his name. I believe that we have put in place, and I think the Bush administration put in place when we were worried about the previous flu -- the Avian flu -- I think we put in place not only procedures but assets that have given us the opportunity to respond.

You didn't ask this question, but we brought up the question about closing the borders. Her belief was that closing the borders would not be either cost-effective at this point in time and, in light of the fact that the virus is already present in the United States, would not necessarily be called for.

Q Mr. Leader, on energy, even if an agreement is reached in the committees on cap-and-trade legislation, it could be a tough vote for a lot of members in the caucus. Would you be committed to bringing an eventual bill to the floor for a vote, trying to pass it in the House, even if the Senate looks like it is not going to take up any House-passed bill, or would you wait

to see what the Senate would do first?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think we are moving on parallel tracks. I don't want to imply that we are waiting for the Senate to act because that would not be accurate. Mr. Waxman and Mr. Markey have been working very hard. As you know, they were scheduled to have a markup in the subcommittee this week. They have delayed that to next week, or at least put it off. And they put it off because they are discussing with their own membership as to exactly what can garner the requisite number of votes.

This is, obviously, a tough issue. I think there is a general agreement and consensus on what needs to be done. The issue on how it is to be done, obviously, is still a matter of substantial debate.

So I do not want to say that we will wait for the Senate to act, which was your question. I don't know when the Senate will act. We are moving ahead. We are trying to address this issue. It is a priority for the President, priority for the Speaker. As you know, energy has been a signature issue for this Speaker. She was instrumental, in my opinion -- I don't know that I have seen a more focused legislative effort than the 2007 energy bill that the Speaker essentially made sure got passed and then was signed in a bipartisan way down at the Department of Energy by President Bush.

So we are going to be moving ahead. Having said that, if the Senate takes action, will that have impact on the House?

It will.

Q Mr. Leader, are congressional leaders working on a plan to speed aid to Pakistan right away -- maybe a vote as soon as next week?

Mr. Hoyer. As congressional leaders, we are discussing with the administration what is needed. I think all of us are very concerned about what is happening in Pakistan. Pakistan in many ways is of higher concern right now than Afghanistan -- and Afghanistan is something that has a high level of concern as well. But Pakistan, I think everybody is concerned about what is happening there, what is happening with the Taliban.

The stability of Pakistan is very, very important to not only the region, but to the United States as well. And so I think the answer to your question is: I can't tell you what action is being planned either by the administration or by us, but that is under active discussion as to what needs to be done. And, if something needs to be done, I think the answer to your question is: We are going to address it.

Q Would that be as soon as next week?

Mr. Hoyer. It could be.

Q How much are we talking about?

Mr. Hoyer. We have the supplemental, as you know.

Q That wouldn't be until later.

Mr. Hoyer. That is true. If we needed to do something earlier, we would do that, I think. Clearly, there is a high

level of concern.

I apologize that this was somewhat abbreviated, but I am told that I have got to be someplace at 11:00.

Q Can you say how much money you are talking about?

Mr. Hoyer. No.

[Whereupon, at 10:59 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]