

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

Wednesday, May 2, 2007

10:30 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning. Thank you very much for being here. A lot of pressure has been put on me to make these meetings humorous. I am glad you gave me the opening somewhat, and to be engaging.

But, in any event, let me go with the purpose of this meeting. We went in at 10:00, as you know. We are going to do one-minutes, then we will consider three rules, the Head Start and the two science bills, and we will then go to the override of the Iraq supplemental conference report. We will then go to the Head Start authorization. There are 12 amendments, as you know, made in order, some Republican, some Democrats, and then we'll consider the H.R. 1867, the National Science Foundation authorization. This bill, as the other science bills, are part of the innovation agenda that Speaker Pelosi talked about last year, and we have continued to talk about, to grow our economy and to protect our global environment. We'll end around 10:00 p.m. this will be a relatively late night -- not relatively, it will be a late night.

On Thursday we are going to consider the Hate Crime Prevention Act under a rule. In addition, we'll consider H.R. 1868, the authorization of the National Institute of Standards and Technology bill. Again, part of the innovation agenda.

The Head Start bill is designed, as all of you know, to improve the quality, to improve access, and to strengthen school readiness generally. It's a program that has bipartisan support. We're hopeful that we'll have bipartisan support on the floor.

The hate crimes bill, which will be on the floor on Thursday, seeks to bring more uniformity and effectiveness to the existing laws. It's supported by two-thirds of the attorneys general in the States. We think it's a very important piece of legislation because so many police officials throughout this country indicate the severity of a crime committed not for personal reasons or even in the commission of a crime, but for ethnic reasons, nationality reasons, reasons that then give fear to a broad group of people because of the nature of the crime.

On the override of the veto, let me reiterate what Speaker Pelosi has said, what I have said, what we continue to say. We passed legislation that fully funded the President's request to support the troops. We regret that he saw fit to veto that bill. It had in it not only support for the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, but we beefed up funding for the fight against terrorism, particularly in Afghanistan, where the Taliban are feared to be resurgent. They are the ones of course who gave aid and comfort and assistance to al Qaeda as they attacked the United States.

The funding in the bill is all of what the President asked for. So when he vetoed the bill last night, he vetoed a bill which included all that he asked for to support the troops. In addition, it included benchmarks and expectations. The expectations were that the Department of Defense promulgated rules for troop deployment times in theater, troop home time, training and equipping of our troops would be followed, and if they weren't followed, it gave the President the opportunity to waive those requirements. So it did not impede the Commander in Chief or the military commanders' flexibility in pursuing our objectives. That's an important point because the President continues to say that we are compromising the ability of the commanders to make decisions. We reject that. That is not accurate.

Secondly, it put benchmarks for the Iraqis. The Iraqis obviously need to perform in various different areas, or, as Petraeus has said, we will not succeed because this is not subject to a military solution, it is subject to a political solution and the political solution must be reached by the Iraqis and the Maliki government must pursue certain objectives which the President set for them in January. We've included that.

The Republicans yesterday had a press conference, press availability on the steps -- I'm not sure exactly where but

I think it was out front -- in which they said they were supportive of benchmarks and they were supportive of benchmarks with consequences for failure to achieve the benchmarks. That's what we've said.

We believe that is what the American people believe is reasonable and, secondly, we believe it is helpful to the Maliki government as they talk to disparate factions to convince them they've got to act or there will be consequences for their failure to do the things that they said they're going to do, amend the constitution, reconciliation, protection for individual rights, sharing of oil revenues, going after militia, and disarming militia, all of those things and more which the Iraqi government knows it must do if a political solution is to be reached.

We're going to have that vote on the override. I don't think anybody expects us to be successful in achieving the number of votes necessary to override the veto. We are meeting with the President this afternoon. We will discuss, I'm sure, next steps. It is my expectation that next steps will be taken promptly, that we will not allow this to languish. Again, Speaker Pelosi and I and others have said we want to achieve the support of the troops as long as they are in harm's way; as long as there is the point of the spear, we are going to support them. Our effort is to redeploy them to get them out of harm's way and to place

responsibility where it belongs, and that is with the Iraqis.

Let me stop with that. Richard.

Q Two parts to follow up what you just said. First, do Democrats have a post-veto strategy for the supplemental, and, secondly, when you say the bill, you want to act promptly, what does that mean for floor action, does it mean for the next week or two before Memorial Day? How soon?

Mr. Hoyer. My hope is within the next 2 weeks. I think -- my hope is that we will complete consideration of a bill that we can send down to the President before the Memorial Day break. I think that's important to do. That will be certainly my objective and I think the objective of the Speaker and others?

Q How long; why 4 weeks?

Mr. Hoyer. House; got to go to the Senate. A difficult fact, but true. So if you're going to get it done by the Memorial Day break, we need to move something in my opinion in the next 2 weeks.

Q Is there a strategy for how to do it?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes, we're discussing the strategy.

Q Discussing, but you don't have one?

Mr. Hoyer. Strategy by definition, it will be announced when we have -- I don't know we'll announce the strategy, we'll pursue the strategy.

Q What are your options here?

Mr. Hoyer. There are a lot of options. The President wants a rubber stamp bill sent down to him, a clean bill. I don't see that as an option; we think it's not what the American public wants, nor what we want, apparently not what the Republicans want either from their press conference yesterday. The President continues to not want any kind of performance benchmarks that he or the Iraqis ought to meet in order to figure out whether or not we can gain -- whether we can be successful.

Again, Petraeus has said this is not subject to a military victory. All the bill the President wants and deals with is military operations. We want to support the military operations, but we want in addition to have what the Iraq Study Group suggested as some plan for political solution both regionally and in Iraq itself.

Q On the second bill, will you stick to the Hastert rule? Will there have to be a majority of the majority on whatever you produce for the second bill?

Mr. Hoyer. The Hastert rule, what we want to do is we want to get legislation done which does what we think it ought to do, on the one hand support the troops, and on the other hand set criteria for judging success and achieving success.

Q Will you rule out a couple of things for us? One,

is it right to say that any timetables for redeployment are going to go on other bills, that won't be on the new bill, and number two, the idea of the 60-day reauthorization, which I know some of your colleagues like and you're not that fond of, probably doesn't have much of a chance in the Senate, can you rule out that will be on there?

Mr. Hoyer. I can't rule it out, but I think your description is accurate of my thoughts about it. My thoughts are, as I have made clear I think publicly, is that I think that what we do now ought to be done until September 30th, which is the end of the fiscal year. I then think that we have the opportunity to consider two pieces of legislation, very significantly, which will continue this debate as it ought to continue; that is the authorization bill and the appropriation bill. The authorization bill will come the latter part of -- about the 20th, 18th, 19th, 20th of May, the appropriation bill will come the last -- 20th, between the 20th and 25th of June. So that there will be two opportunities to again speak to the policies that we're pursuing in Iraq, on the authorization bill and on the appropriation bill. So this is a very important but nevertheless not the final word on policy as it relates to what we're doing on Iraq.

Q Mr. Leader, you said that this bill contained funding that the President asked for.

Mr. Hoyer. It did. It does.

Q Isn't this a point that the President has to make at this point when his approval ratings are low, Democratic controlled Congress, and at some point he has to stake out his turf politically, those who do support him in the war effort, say this is my agenda that differs from the Democrats, regardless of what this bill would have been?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, you'd have to ask the President whether he has to do that. I think it's unfortunate that he did not conclude that this bill did what he asked and added some additional things on there consistent with the Iraq Study Group, consistent with the American public's view of what we ought to do, and in my opinion consistent with, frankly, what a lot of the Republicans are talking about in the Congress, and that is requiring the Iraqis to themselves perform consistent with Petraeus's view. If they don't, we can't solve this issue.

Q Politically don't you have to play the Democrats on the Hill as a foil on major issues?

Mr. Hoyer. Again, what I don't adopt in your premise is he has to do that. What he should do is adopt a change in direction which presents some hope of success. Gates, as I have regurgitated, stated on a number of times, has indicated we are not winning in Iraq. Let me reiterate what I said last week, we've lost 10 percent of the people we

have lost in Iraq in the last 4 months?

Q Mr. Hoyer.

Mr. Hoyer. So whether he has to or not, I think what we all have to do in my opinion is to try to adopt policies that will lead to success.

Q Mr. Hoyer, the Republicans seem to think that with weaker Iraq policy language that you're going to lose a lot of votes inside the caucus and that will give them leverage in helping force out some of the non-Iraq things like farm aid and the like. Do you think that's a correct analysis?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know. The Republicans should have passed drought relief for our farmers who have been suffering one of the most droughts in the Midwest in the last 3 years. We should have passed that 2 years ago. We should have passed it a year ago. They didn't do that.

Katrina relief, veterans health care, which obviously startling was active duty health care. These bills should have been funded.

Q On the votes do you think you're going to lose the Democrats?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think we're frankly going to lose many Republican votes on veterans health issues or active duty military health issues or Katrina or drought aid.

Q Mr. Hoyer.

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think that is going to be. Some

will.

Q What about the provision near and dear to your heart, the Federal minimum wage increase and the accompanying tax package? Is that something you're going to insist on when you meet with the President? What's your expectation?

Mr. Hoyer. My expectation is we'll include that in any bill we pass.

Q You talked about the benchmarks. If the benchmarks are no longer tied to a withdrawal schedule of American forces what could be some of the consequences that would be attached to benchmarks in a new bill?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, first of all, the Senate added a provision, 60-day reporting. That was the Nelson amendment in the Senate. I would think if we pass something, a 30-day reporting, so that -- I didn't tell you but your information is that we're going to have two bills coming up and then require two conference reports, so over the next 4 months we're going to have a lot of focus on defense policy generally and Iraq policy particularly. If we get an every 30-day report on what progress the Iraqis are making, what progress we're making, Petraeus told us that by September we'll know where this is. If we go to September 30th on funding and get an every 30-day report from the President on progress, then I think we'll have a basis on which to make

better decisions.

Q Just a reporting requirement is pretty weak, isn't it, just require a report every month?

Mr. Hoyer. Again, let me reiterate that this bill is not the last word. This bill, if we fund through the end of the fiscal year, that we then have the 2008 funding bill and 2008 authorization bill.

Q Now that many Republican leaders have said they were interested in binding benchmarks on the Iraqi government, at least for the economic reconstruction aid portion of it, why isn't the Democratic leadership taking the ball on that and run with it and put space between them and the administration? If they would vote for such a bill, that's a good start for you guys, isn't it?

Mr. Hoyer. Your premise may be incorrect.

Q Well, Lawton said this.

Mr. Hoyer. Your premise is we're not running with it.

Q I'm saying are you going to do that. Is that your strategy?

Mr. Hoyer. What you've heard me saying is that we are now at a point in time where I think there is certainly going to be discussions. I'm going to talk to Boehner. There was some -- we have talked, but it wasn't a substantive discussion, it was a discussion that we ought to talk, which is what I related.

Q So you had talks about talks?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, that's the first step. You never talk if you don't say let's talk, right. So that's the first step, and I have done that both with Boehner and with Blunt and I would think we'll have discussions on it and I'm hopeful that we can move forward.

Again, I reiterate, Speaker Pelosi and I have indicated we're going to fund the troops. We're not going to leave our troops there in harm's way at the point of the spear without the resources they need to achieve success, and certainly to keep themselves as safe as possible. And let me make a point here, which I will say when I speak on the veto, the President yesterday in his veto message said, quote, we want the generals to be making the decision, not the politicians in Washington. All of the decisions with reference to the Iraq war have been made by Bush, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Bremer, not by the generals.

Had we pursued what the generals recommended, Shinseki, et al., we may well have been in a much, much better position than we are today. It is the politicians in Washington, Mr. Rumsfeld being at the head of the line, although he worked for President Bush, the Commander in Chief, who had been making the decisions on our tactics and policies in Iraq. They have not been successful policy. And Dick Cheney. Thank you. My litany will be five in the

future, not four.

Q Mr. Leader, I just want to clarify, going in --

Mr. Hoyer. Am I being unclear about what I'm saying?

Q So Democrats will not attempt a second time to put in withdrawal language when going to meet with the President?

Mr. Hoyer. The answer to the question was we're discussing strategy and we're going to be continuing to discuss it.

Q But you're seizing the opportunity that President Bush is not up for reelection and many Republicans are so your people are working that side of the aisle and going to those Republicans and saying look, you know, this is an unpopular war.

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to get ahead of myself. What I said was I don't know about others, although I think others are discussing, and I don't want to pinpoint who's discussing what, but there have been discussions about talking, and we're going down there today with the object of talking. So that's where we are, without anticipating what our strategy might be.

Q Some of your colleagues on the Ways and Mean --

Mr. Hoyer. You go ahead.

Q We will most likely see withdrawal language on other bills?

Mr. Hoyer. The point I made was, without anticipating what you're going to see, is there are obviously in the House of Representatives very strong feelings on all sides of these issues. My point is we have four opportunities coming up in the next 5 months, the authorization bill, the appropriation bill, and the conferences on each and the conferences themselves to discuss these issues. I'm sure that the objections will be raised at each one of those junctures.

Q Your colleagues on Ways and Means are looking at a package to fix the AMT. Part of that would include raising AMT rates for the top one million earners. Some of your Senate Democratic colleagues are nervous about that proposal, they are worried about being Mondaled in 2008, that people don't know enough about the AMT to know they're going to be paying it and all you're saying is you're going to raise taxes.

Mr. Hoyer. People are increasingly aware of them being caught by the AMT, people who were never contemplated to be caught by the Alternative Minimum Tax. The Alternative Minimum Tax was designed, as you know, I'm not telling you anything that you guys don't know, was designed for the purpose of ensuring that people who had a large number of preference items but were making great sums of money contributed to the support of their country. And so that no

matter what preference items they had that might exempt their income from taxation otherwise, they would pay an Alternative Minimum Tax to support their country, from which they are benefiting greatly. I think that's a fair thing to do. But we were talking about people making millions, not people making tens of thousands or even a hundred fifty thousand. That was not the contemplation. And so as a result of not indexing the Alternative Minimum Tax we are now getting caught in that milieu that an awful lot of people were never intended to be caught. So Mr. Rangel and the committee are talking about an Alternative Minimum Tax reform which will essentially exempt those under \$250,000 dollars. They'll still pay taxes, they'll still be affected by the regular Tax Code, but they will not be caught up in the Alternative Minimum Tax calculation. Beyond that there will be modifications. We'll have to see what those modifications are. We're hopeful that it will be a zero sum game, that is to say -- not hopeful, that's our objective. We've adopted PAYGO, that's an entitlement, and PAYGO will apply.

Some in the Senate have talked about eliminating the Alternative Minimum Tax. I would not be for that personally. I don't speak for others, but I would not be for that. I think the rationale for adoption was a sound rationale.

Q But you're supportive of Mr. Rangel?

Mr. Hoyer. The direction he's moving is a very positive direction, which I support.

Q Mr. Hoyer, a group of ministers came to Capitol Hill last week expressing concern about hate crimes legislation, leaving them open to liability from what they say from the pulpit. Do you have anything to say about what effect that will have?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think anybody who doesn't commit a crime is going to be liable through this legislation. I'm not sure what their premise was.

Q Because of the existing -- well, to say if you counsel someone who then goes out and commits a crime, that they can be held liable.

Mr. Hoyer. Not unless you counsel them to commit the crime. I don't think this adds any liability for speech, even hate speech, even speech that we would reject. This is not about speech, this is about action and intent and the action being premised on getting a group, whether they are African Americans, whether they are Jews, whether they are Catholics, whether they are Baptists, a group, and the reason being because you escalate the crime from a crime against individuals, bad in and of itself, to a group crime because they are members of a particular group and no other reason.

Q What about immigration? Are you going to wait until the Senate -- because Kyl and Kennedy are working on a compromise.

Mr. Hoyer. My understanding from Leader Reid is that he hopes to have legislation on the floor the latter part of this month. Certainly in that context we will wait. As you know, I have talked about immigration being on the floor and I have talked with Chairman Conyers in July. We talked about working in a bipartisan fashion. President Bush has made it very clear he wants to work closely with us, we've indicated we want to work with him in adopting comprehensive immigration reform. So the timetable now seems to be still that the Senate is going to go in May. If they do that, we're certainly going to wait.

Q Can you talk about whether Iraq and all the debate on Iraq is delaying other things that the majority said they wanted to do, like a budget? Are you going to get a budget on the floor in the next couple of weeks? Has this basically caused a lot of your domestic priorities to slip?

Mr. Hoyer. We were very successful in the House at passing initially our domestic priorities which we pledged to do and we adopted those in a very efficient fashion, including adopting all the appropriation bills on the domestic side of the ledger, which should have been done last year. We talked about things that were in the bills

and the supplemental that should have been adopted last year. The appropriation bills were passed, we passed some environmental bills, water bills. We've moved a domestic agenda I think very significant to the American public. All those bills have not moved through the United States Senate. Their processes are slower. Some are now moving. We hope they continue to move. The minimum wage I told you we were going to include again in whatever bill we pass.

But clearly Iraq, which is certainly the number one issue on the minds of an awful lot of Americans, we have 170,000, give or take some thousands, of people in Iraq and more thousands in Afghanistan. It properly is taking much of our attention at this point in time. But we want to move ahead on the budget. The answer to your question is I'm hopeful we'll move the budget in the next couple of weeks, that we think that's important to do.

This is the additional question to the last question.

Q Do you expect this war pretty much to go on for these next 4 months given the fact that Democrats are unable to stop it or in any substantial way and looking at a time line that talks about really the end of the summer when General Petraeus will be judged and this whole effort will be judged? Is that your expectation, that things will continue to go as they have been going in recent months?

Mr. Hoyer. Let me say had the President signed the

bill yesterday, that would have been the case. That would have been the case had he signed the bill yesterday. So the answer to your question is yes, we are trying to impact that policy. We'll try and get the administration to move in a new direction and try to assess responsibility and accountability to the Iraqis to perform, as they must, according to everybody's judgment, if this matter is going to be resolved.

Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 11:00 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]