

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

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Tuesday, May 8, 2007

2:05 p.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good afternoon. I don't know who does the scheduling; but, boy, they're not doing a particularly good job today.

Q Aren't you in charge of the schedule?

Mr. Hoyer. Oh, that's right. Son of a gun.

Okay. Today we are doing all sorts of things at all different times.

But I bring you greetings from the Queen who was at Goddard Space Flight Center this morning.

Q Was she really 200 years old?

Mr. Hoyer. That was a vicious attack on a gracious lady, and will be expunged from the record.

Q But they already sent out the transcript.

Mr. Hoyer. They haven't. We are going to expunge it.

We are going to vote on the rule today. We have already done this because this was written for earlier today. We are passing the rules. The Virginia tribes will be on the calendar. We will be out of here by 4 or 5:00 p.m.

Tomorrow we will do the Homeland Security authorization bill under a rule, and we also may consider the Small Business Fairness in Contracting Act that is now being proposed; there is a slight problem, the two committees are trying to work out those problems now.

On Thursday, we will do the Intelligence authorization bill, also under a rule. And possibly do part one of the supplemental bill dealing with Iraq, and on Friday do part two.

It is also quite possible that tomorrow we will do a suspension bill. Mr. Miller's committee is now working on legislation, along with Mr. McKeon, dealing with the student loan problem that has been the subject of a great deal of press coverage and concern by Congress in terms of whether or not the student loan program is being compromised by insider trading, in effect, or dealing.

So that is our schedule.

I want to comment briefly and then we will go to questions.

I believe -- I think the public certainly ought to believe, contrary to Republican assertions, that the House of Representatives has been extraordinarily productive during the first 4 months of this year, whether it was defending our country in the 9/11 Commission Report, the Wounded Warriors, the Rail and Transit Security, Dubai Ports bill, all of which -- many of which languished in the last Congress have all been passed in the first 4 months.

Growing the economy, where the minimum wage bill passed the House again. Again, I understand they have not yet passed the Senate. That bill, of course, will be in the

supplemental again; and four innovation agenda bills that we passed dealing with science and technology and math, education and educators and students; protecting our planet, creating a Select Committee on Global Warming, headed up by Ed Markey, who will be reporting out next month or reporting at least on progress next month to Mr. Dingell and other committees; biofuels bill, renewable energy bill. Several clean water bills that we passed. All of which are steps towards our energy agenda.

Accountable and reforming government ethics reform package that we adopted at the beginning of the year, whistle-blower protection, accountability in contract, foyer reform, which, as I know, is very important to all of you, who utilizes foyer requests on a regular basis.

Now, over the next few months as well, we have scheduled lobbying reform, DOD authorization, Intel authorization, which I have spoken about; the appropriations bill, which we hope to do; all but perhaps the Defense bill by June 30th. An immigration bill in July.

The only thing standing in the way of, frankly, passing much of this has been the unwillingness of the Republicans in the Senate to cooperate in bringing matters to the floor. But for that, I think many of these pieces of legislation would have been on the President's desk. Whether he would have signed them or not, I don't know.

The stem cell bill, which I did not refer to -- I think I referred to it briefly -- a very important, very important piece of legislation the President says he is going to veto.

Other than that, though, he has not threatened veto on any bills other than the one we passed late last week.

[NOTE: The White House has issued veto threats against 8 bills including the stem cell bill and the hate crimes bill.]

The Public Laws enacted in the 110th Congress were 16; 10 were passed in the 109th Congress by this time. That is a 60 percent increase in the productivity, if you will.

Bills and joint resolutions passed, 165 versus 72. That is a 129 percent increase in productivity. Days in session, 59 versus 40. The productivity, obviously, cannot be measured simply by bills passed, I understand that, as Republicans will observe immediately. But it nevertheless indicates that we are addressing issues of great importance and moving them through the House of Representatives. And the leader in the House, Harry Reid, is trying to move those bills through the Senate as well.

You just -- many of you probably just came from the press conference that we had upstairs dealing with the energy issue. I mentioned my constituents are driving, literally, an hour, hour and a half, sometimes 2 hours from Saint Mary's County into Washington to work at \$3 average

gas price, a little over \$3 gas price. That is putting an extraordinary stress on families.

We have seven hearings scheduled over the next 3 weeks on various issues relating to price gouging, relating to energy supplies, regarding antitrust relationships, and we expect to be discussing what steps we can take.

Clearly the solution to this is having alternative energy supplies. We have discussed energy independence. The Speaker has made it a very high-priority item. We believe energy independence is a matter of national security, economic security, and environmental well-being.

If we have alternative energy sources, let's say biofuels from the Midwest as opposed to relying on the Middle East, then not only will we be energy independent because we will have our own sources, but we will put a downward pressure on prices, because if we don't have to demand their oil, and demand goes down, then prices go down. That is inevitably the operation not only on the international markets but also domestic markets as well.

Q When are you expecting a vote on the supplemental -- the new supplemental bill, and under what kind of rule will it be considered, do you think?

Mr. Hoyer. We expect to have the first vote, hope to have the first vote by Thursday, maybe the second vote -- this may be bifurcated -- on Friday. And I expect it to be

under a restricted rule. I don't know if it will be a closed rule, but it may, and the reason for that obviously is we have been discussing this matter now for at least 3 months. The component parts of the bill are known essentially. There will be some modifications to our proposal that will be made for the purposes of, hopefully, having the President sign a bill, while at the same time giving to the Congress, the policy-making body under the Constitution, the opportunity to revisit in the short term the progress that is being made in Iraq, the progress that the Iraqi Government is making towards meeting the benchmarks set by the President and holding them accountable for meeting such benchmarks.

But we expect Thursday and Friday there to be votes on those two bills.

We want to get it through the House as quickly as possible so that the Senate can act and we can get to conference.

Q Can you explain the two parts? Part one versus part two?

Mr. Hoyer. Part one is essentially the Iraqi funding, the entire package, with a significant portion of it fenced, so that the dollars that are unfenced would be approximately 3 months in duration, giving the Congress the opportunity in mid-July to make an assessment as to what progress is being

made.

The second bill would include, presumably, all of the emergency relief for the farm communities, not just the drought relief, but there are three or four other bills that might be included in that second package. They haven't been absolutely put together yet. I want to be pretty general, in that my expectation is the first part you would include -- in the first bill you would include Katrina, you would include BRAC, you would include military health, so you would include that package of Defense-related bills.

Q So the second part is basically what the Republicans would call pork -- is that?

Mr. Hoyer. I rejected the --

Q But I mean -- I am sorry, I didn't --

Mr. Hoyer. They would call it pork. I'll accept that. Pork, though, as I said last time, I think most of us in this room think of pork as something that a Member adds for their district. Essentially, farm aid is for the country. What we are talking about are general needs that are added to a bill which should have been passed in the last Congress, and yes, even in the Congress before that, but which were like the nine appropriation bills left on the table. And we are not going to apologize for acting to give farmers who are in dire straits as a result of drought relief.

This is not pork in the sense that I think most people think of pork, as Members are getting a bridge or a road or a post office or something of that --

Q Why are you doing it this way? Will they be married up in the end?

Mr. Hoyer. It may be married up in the end, out of conference. I am not sure. But I think that the Appropriations Committee feels that they want to make it clear that we want to put a bill out, first of all, that funds the troops, provides for the support of our troops, as I said, in harm's way. There is no question but that they have funding in the short term, and perhaps for the longer term, because all of the money will be appropriated, portions will be fenced, and the second portion we feel is totally legitimate; but we don't want to get the first bill subject to being, frankly, characterized as some here have characterized it.

Q Will that Iraq first bill be on Thursday?

Mr. Hoyer. The first bill I expect on Thursday.

Q So all of the money that is going to be in the bill is going to be fenced off, and you will have to come back and get a second vote?

Mr. Hoyer. A portion will be fenced off. We expect the unfenced portion to take essentially through the end of August.

Q But it will all be appropriated, \$95.5 billion will be appropriated. Then you have to come back at the end of August for the second?

Mr. Hoyer. End of July. But the money will go through August.

Q And what benchmarks need to be met?

Mr. Hoyer. Same ones.

Q What happens --

Mr. Hoyer. There are a few additions.

There are going to be some additional -- you know, Mr. Skelton and others, Mr. Israel and others from New York, have talked about looking at the possibility when you certify that an Iraqi segment is able to replace an American segment of similar size, and the reason I use "segment" that is not the military term, the reason being because they are not analogous. If you talk about a division, they are not the same size.

But in any event, that may be the same added as well. The minimum wage will be included in the first part as well. So there will be some other things there as well.

Q What happens if the benchmarks are not met; or can you explain how the second vote works and how --

Mr. Hoyer. There is no automatic result of the benchmarks not being met. What the benchmarks will be doing and the 30-day reports that the President will be required

to make and the specific report on the benchmarks will be a piece of information that the Congress will need to make a substantive decision on how we go forward. But it will not -- those benchmarks, in and of themselves not being met, will not result in something happening.

Q But the unfenced portion of this --

Mr. Hoyer. Although I said that. I don't want to -- the economic consequences may still be in there. Remember, the economic consequences in the first bill where we did 50 percent of the economic aid as a result of -- I, frankly, I said that too quickly because I am not sure -- I don't see my -- I don't see my brains here.

Q But in other words, you are saying that there is -- they get 30 billion, and then explain how --

Mr. Hoyer. They are going to get 3 months of funding?

Q Right. And so --

Mr. Hoyer. And the balance will be fenced, be subject to the reports, and then the Congress would have an accelerated vote that would be taken immediately preceding the consideration of the Defense Appropriations bill. To that extent, I have told you that we want to do all of the appropriations bills prior to June 30th. Let me amend that now. It has been -- Mr. Murtha wants to have his bill done in tandem with the fencing vote.

Q What if you -- do you have to vote on the fencing?

Is it absolute?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes, you have to. Procedures of the bill demands a vote. Like a fast track, if you will, for --

Q So before the rest of the money is released, the House has to vote "yea" or "nay".

So technically, though, even if it's 95.5, if Congress left for recess and they forget -- or not forgot, but said hey, I am not going to take the vote, the money stops?

Mr. Hoyer. The money would stop some 45 days later.

Q Forty-five days?

Mr. Hoyer. The date in -- is July 14th or 13th. July 13th?

Q July 13th is the vote?

Mr. Hoyer. July 13th -- no. The money is not -- does not stop July 13th. The vote would be July 13th.

Q The vote would be?

Mr. Hoyer. Uh-huh.

Q So 45 days after that, or after enactment?

Mr. Hoyer. We are giving 3 months. The report would be July 13th -- excuse me. The fencing vote would come -- I don't know the exact time frame. I had it here, and I have read it quickly, but I can't -- I want you to check the specifics because I may be --

Q The bottom line --

Mr. Hoyer. The July 13th report, and then there is

mandated in the legislation a vote preceding a vote on the appropriation bill on the fencing or the release of the fence. That vote would occur prior to the consideration of the Defense appropriation. But it is mandated to occur. And we are not going to offset it, with all due respect.

Q On the report -- so it is up to Congress whether to give the money. There is no onus on the President for consequences about not getting money. It is just you get this report and you decide whether or not, based on the report, to give?

Mr. Hoyer. Essentially there is no deadline for the President.

Q What makes you think he won't veto this?

Mr. Hoyer. He hasn't said so yet. I think if you -- I know all of you have been reading the press. The press is indicating what we think is correctly a reflection of the American public sentiment and impacting Republican votes.

Mr. Boehner indicated that benchmarks were the consequences. Mr. Blunt has indicated that. They don't want time lines. They don't want a drop-dead date: You get out of Iraq. But clearly what is happened, Mr. McConnell said, "I think the time to look at where we are is late summer." Isn't that a good juxtaposition to 3 months of funding from the end of May? Where does that get you? It gets you to late summer.

"I think it's time to look at where we are," McConnell said.

McConnell also said: There was bipartisan dissatisfaction with the Iraqi Government in the Senate and this was an area, quote, "we should concentrate on," close quote, as congressional leaders continue to negotiate a compromise, et cetera.

The minority leader said progress benchmarks could be included to prod the Iraqis into enacting oil revenue-sharing legislation, et cetera.

Q Have you asked John Boehner if he supports this?

Mr. Hoyer. John Boehner said on Sunday he was going to look at the benchmarks.

Q Sir, Mr. Boehner said, post their conference meeting, he and Mr. Blunt were speaking out against this proposal, what they understand of it, so they called it unconscionable if you only provide 60 days of funding.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, he is wrong on 60 days of funding. It's longer than that. We provide all of the funding subject to another vote with reference to what progress is being made.

Again, let me quote Mr. McConnell: "I think the time to look at where we are is late summer."

Q Mr. Hoyer, if I could?

Mr. Hoyer. Sure.

Q In the worst-case scenario, in mid-July, you take this vote before Defense appropriations -- this mandated vote, if it goes down, the fenced money -- you don't approve the fenced money, the money remains until the end of August anyway. Let's say 6 weeks after the vote there is funding, then what happens?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, presumably -- and I don't want to anticipate -- but presumably what the money could then be used for, and I think it says this in the bill specifically, that within 180 days, redeployment has to start. So this is not a, you know, "get out tomorrow."

Now, you understand, this will have to go to conference, we will have to discuss it in the conference. And we will see what comes out of conference.

Q How much is fenced and how much is unfenced in dollar terms?

Mr. Hoyer. You know, they say 3 months funding, I think.

Let me tell you, I have got a figure in my mind, but I don't know that that figure is correct. So I am hesitant to give it to you.

I think it is about, however -- I will hesitate to give a guess here, which is a pretty informed guess, you understand. It is about \$30 billion for the war effort itself and about \$12 billion for the ancillary veterans

health, military health, et cetera, related issues to the prosecution of the war.

Q There is a time line here that is not explicit, as explicit as previous bills that you voted on. But there is an implicit time line here. Is that enough to satisfy your Iraq bill?

Mr. Hoyer. We will see. Some of them have been -- we are in a process here -- I am -- I have not asked all of them. So I can't answer your question "yes" or "no." Some have said "yes," I will tell you that. Some I have heard are not happy with this. But some were not happy with the last one. So it is not surprising that they may not be happy with this one which they see as less definitive.

Q Sir, one more question?

Mr. Hoyer. I think that what we are doing is trying to reach a compromise with the President so a bill can be signed to support the troops, but which also retains for the Congress its policy-making authority and oversight. When I quote Mr. McConnell, it is clear that, in a bipartisan way, that Mr. Boehner and Mr. Blunt, irrespective of what they may have said about this particular proposal, have articulated a concern about Iraqi performance and in a sense that benchmarks for Iraqi performance were appropriate. So we will have to discuss that in the context of that filing here.

Q One nonwar question. I want to know what you can tell us about the negotiations about the lobbyist disclosure.

Mr. Hoyer. They are continuing.

[Whereupon, at 20:30 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]