PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,

STENY H. HOYER

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Tuesday, May 12, 2009

11:04 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. I'm sure all of you -- I'm surprised it is on the front page of the newspapers, but the President accused Malia and Sasha for being responsible for that airplane flight Saturday night. I don't know whether you saw the President. He was excellent at the correspondents' dinner. And I hope if you were there, you enjoyed it as much as I did. But I thought that was a very funny line. Those of you who didn't hear it, he essentially said Malia and Sasha had been grounded, and he didn't care whether they were President's children or not, taking the airplane out for a joyride is not acceptable.

Okay. Floor schedule. We're going to meet at 2:00 and -- suspension bills. And there will also be another Flake resolution to deal with. Last vote is around 7:00.

Wednesday we'll meet at 10:00. We're going to do the Weapons Acquisition Reform Through Enhancing Technical Knowledge and Oversight Act, a very significant bill. The Senate has passed a bill. We hope to conference that bill quickly; pretty close together on substance. It is a major reform action. And we also expect to consider the 21st Century Green High-Performing Public School Facilities Act.

Thursday and Friday, we are hopeful that we'll consider and complete the supplemental that was marked up last week in committee. There were new budget deficits announced yesterday, obviously a little higher, not much, but too high.

Social Security and Medicare trustee report coming out today, also shows the problems with our entitlement programs are substantial. I had an opportunity to speak about that the other day. None of us are happy about the deficit that we're confronting this year or next. Most of us believe, however, that it was, first of all, a result of the failed economy that this administration inherited; secondly, failure of regulation; and thirdly, that we were going to be responsible, we had to respond in a major way to try to stabilize the economy, which we did. All of that combined to create the deficit picture that we see.

Now, there were only -- I say only -- there were 539,000 jobs lost last month. That is still a way too high number, we want to be producing jobs, but it is substantially lower than the last 5 months. But we lost 4 million jobs over those 6 months and over 5 million jobs over the past year. So the economy is still struggling. Consumer spending rose, however, in the first quarter, and housing sales increased 2 months in a row, February and March, so that I think there are signs that the recovery and reinvestment bill is starting to have an effect. We hope that it has had the effect of retaining some jobs and creating others. Three-and-a-half million jobs obviously was the target of doing one or the other or both, and some signs indicate that we are perhaps turning the corner. That is a hopeful sign for all Americans.

The weapons acquisition reform that we are talking about this

week is a start on trying to get a handle on spending. The President, of course, proposed 17 billion in cuts. That was also a start. And we'll be considering both the weapons acquisition reform, and, as we go forward, Secretary Gates has obviously indicated and has proposed some substantial changes in acquisitions at the Defense Department where we can save significant money.

This is just a start. We need to do more, obviously, to get our deficits under control. One thing we can do is to restore statutory PAYGO. As you know, the Speaker and I are committed to seeing that pass. The President is as well, and we'll be working on that after the August break. Excuse me, after the Memorial Day break.

The two major items that the committees are grappling with, obviously, are energy and health care, the energy bill obviously being discussed within the Energy and Commerce Committee. I know that Congressmen Waxman and Markey are working very hard towards creating the consensus necessary to have broad support for that legislation. They are still working on that. I have not talked to them today about where they are, but I'm hopeful, as is the Speaker, that we'll move those before the Memorial Day break as we move them in the sense of out of committee. We don't expect them on the floor until next month.

On health care, momentum continues to grow, the comprehensive reform. And I was heartened to see the health industry coming

together, indicating that they could effect some $2 trillion of savings. That's obviously ambitious, but I think accomplishable, and will be helpful as we move ahead on health reform where we want to bring costs down for consumers and for the government as well that spends about half of the dollars that are spent to purchase health care. We hope to have that health care reform bill, as I have told you, on the floor before the August break.

Okay. Let me stop -- no. I'm introducing today two transmission bills, the Advanced Cable Deployment Authorization Act and a Financing Advanced and Superconducting Transmission Act. I would hope that the committee will at some point in time consider these bills. What these bills seek to do, as we look for alternative energy sources, we need to make sure that we have a grid that can convey that energy around the country in an effective and efficient way. There are, from a technical standpoint, far more efficient ways to convey energy than the copper wires that we're currently using, and this will try to encourage the development of those technologies and the deployment of those technologies. Okay.

Q They talk about this energy/climate change bill here. The climate change part seems to be the most vexing part. And I've been hearing a lot in the past 24 hours that in order to move through your caucus with a lot of skeptical moderate Democrats, that what they'll have to do is make this more of an energy bill. Is that going to be the reality here? And do you sort of dovetail

artfully from a climate change bill, because that is politically toxic in some quarters, to an energy bill, because that is sailing?

Mr. Hoyer. I'm not sure that I buy your premise that climate change is toxic; although the climate change is toxic, and that is the problem. And I think there is pretty well consensus on the fact that we need to be both energy independent and have a use of energy that is friendly to the environment and does not add to the global warming challenge that confronts us.

Now, how you do that is controversial, but I don't think, in answer to your question, that we're going to move or that we think you can separate the two objectives. We need to be energy independent, and by that, use fuels that are available to us here in this country, not exclusively -- we'll always import some of our energy -- but to have fuels that do not subject us to being held hostage by energy producers overseas who may not wish us or our economy well. In that process, however, we want to use energy sources and encourage energy sources and require energy sources to be nonthreatening to the global environment. So we think the two are very much related, and we'll have to figure out how we get from where we are to where we need to be.

Q But there is political challenges here.

Mr. Hoyer. No doubt about that. That is self-evident.

Q Sir, with regard to that way forward, since the Senate is, in fact, pursuing energy and climate change separately through

separate committees, separate bills, how is the way forward then, as a practical matter, given that if the House bill with those coupled together --

Q The Senate is proceeding because of its jurisdictional differences with us. Energy and Commerce has the unified jurisdiction, and we have always said we want to do one bill. But the Senate is proceeding as its jurisdiction dictates through its two committees, and it would be our expectation at some point in time that we hopefully pass one bill and unify the bills in some way. We think that is possible.

Q Do you have the votes in the Senate for that?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to predict that, but I think there will be the votes in the Senate ultimately to pass an energy bill which is also sensitive to the environment.

Q On the same topic, will the cash-for-clunkers legislation -- will you be amenable to passing that attached to something other than the climate change for your package?

Mr. Hoyer. I think we are open to that discussion, and I think those discussions are ongoing. There obviously is concern by the automobile manufacturers that the longer that stays out there, the more inclined people will be to wait. We want them to get into the automobile purchasing market, assuming they want a new automobile, sooner rather than later.

Q Do you think -- I mean, has this controversy over interrogation techniques and who knew what when -- Speaker Pelosi

got a lot of attention recently. Do you think this has in any way affected or undermined her support within the caucus?

Mr. Hoyer. No, I don't.

Q Mr. Leader, what is your role back and forth between the Blue Dogs and the Chairmen who are working out the health care legislation? And why do they feel they have not been involved? Are they going to be more involved?

Mr. Hoyer. I had a discussion with the Chairmen, and I've had a discussion with the Blue Dogs, and I will continue to do both. That does not surprise any of you, obviously. I'm involved with all the Chairmen, and I'm also close to the Blue Dogs. So nobody is shocked that I'm talking to both in trying to work out the way forward, if you will.

I think the Blue Dogs are -- you know, the questions they raise, there were a significant number that raised the question, and they wanted to be included in the formulation of the legislation. I think that is a reasonable request. I think the Chairman -- what?

Q Will they be?

Mr. Hoyer. I think they will be. We are going to expand -- the Speaker and I both want to pursue expansion of communications between all the members of the caucus and the committee Chairs, and I think the committee Chairs want to do so as well.

Q Mr. Leader, switching topics real quick. On health care, the sticky issues seem to be shaking up the public plan,

which President Obama said he still supports, something he ran on. Is that something you support, the creation of a health plan?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q Would you, in an effort to maybe compromise with Republicans, would you vote for a bill that didn't include it?

Mr. Hoyer. I certainly wouldn't say that I wouldn't vote for a bill that didn't include it if I thought it was a good bill otherwise.

Let me say that I think Senator Schumer has come up with a proposal worthy of consideration, because the concern about the public plan by the private plans is that it will be a stalking horse essentially driving them out of business. That is a legitimate concern.

Senator Schumer's discussion is, look, let's make the public plan and the private plans have a level playing field. Senator Schumer indicates he is for a public plan, but wants to try to fashion a public plan so that it does not become automatically perceived as something that is going to undermine the private sector delivery. There are obviously some single-payer proponents who do want that objective, and we'll have to see where we can get agreement. But I think Senator Schumer's suggestion was a useful one.

The President indicated, in response to Mr. Grassley, as you recall, at the health care summit, that he thought a public plan alternative was appropriate, from his perspective, to ensure that,

A, there is an alternative available to people, and B, that there is sort of a fair incentive for the private sector to bring costs down and to make plans accessible; i.e., no pre-existing condition preclusion and things of that nature.

David.

Q Mr. Leader, now that the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C., City Council has approved a measure that would recognize gay marriages wherever they come from, ultimately this bill could wind up in Congress. As you know, they have the final say over D.C. legislation.

Mr. Hoyer. I know that too well.

Q We've talked about this before.

Mr. Hoyer. We keep going down it almost daily on this, on the other issue, on the voter issue.

Q That is for next. But first, on the council, are you getting any sense that there will be an effort to block that bill up here, and are you getting any vibes from your more conservative Blue Dogs that a vote one way or the other on that could be a vote -- any other vote to put it down would be risky for them? What is the state of play on that here now?

Mr. Hoyer. I haven't talked to any members of the Blue Dogs specifically about the actions of the District of Columbia, but your question, do I think it will come up, I would be surprised if it didn't come up because there will be some Members who, as they always do, want to be D.C. Council people, and they'll want to

take legislative action on this for their own purposes. So I expect it to come up.

Q Can I just follow up? What is the latest on the D.C. vote/gun?

Mr. Hoyer. You missed your opportunity on that, Dave. The latest is I'm continuing to work on it. It is as complex a puzzle as I have dealt with in some respects because of the fact that proponents of the amendment are not proponents of the bill and vice versa. It is not as if you could put the amendment on, you're going to pick up votes for the bill. And, in fact, if you put the amendment on, you may, in fact, lose votes that you would have for the bill.

So we are working on it. And I'm working on it hard. I don't know how many of you saw the colloquy last Thursday when Mr. Cantor raised the issue of the second amendment. The Supreme Court has made it very clear that the Second Amendment, which is part of our Constitution which I support. Applies to individuals. It didn't go much beyond that in specific, but they indicated this applies to individuals, and as a result, individuals have a constitutional right to have arms. The Supreme Court did not say that there couldn't be constraints on that and oversight on that by local jurisdictions, and almost every local jurisdiction has such oversight. I know Maryland does and Virginia does. And the District of Columbia has been working on this, as you know. And I'm working with Eleanor Holmes Norton. I talked to the Mayor, I

talked to the White House, and trying to find a path to resolving this conundrum that we confront.

Q On the gun issue, a little more broadly, Senator Feinstein and some other Members, I think, are going to reintroduce the assault weapons ban legislation this week. How will that legislation fare in the House, and when might it come up?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, she just introduced it?

Q I think she did this week.

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to speculate how it is going to fare in the House, having not been introduced yet. All of these issues regarding guns -- I'm a supporter of the assault weapons issue. I think, properly defined, it is an appropriate thing for us to do. I was in Mexico, as you know, about a month ago, and they are very concerned about the flow, from their perspective, of assault weapons into Mexico to the gangs that are murdering people and creating mayhem, which is why they have had to send the army, because the police force for whatever reason, either corruption or being outgunned, were having a very difficult time.

Q Mr. Leader, on your transmission legislation, is it your desire to have that folded into the climate/energy bill that is moving? And on the climate/energy bill, two key challenges are whether to provide emission allowances to many sectors and also the renewable electricity standard. How are you weighing in on those two challenges?

Mr. Hoyer. I haven't weighed in on either of those challenges in the sense I haven't weighed in, if I understand your question, in trying to urge this alternative or that alternative. On the other hand, the Speaker and I feel it is very, very important to pass an energy bill, and therefore, I know Mr. Waxman, Mr. Markey and others are working very hard to create consensus necessary to pass that bill.

You've read, I have read, obviously there are discussions about what year and what amounts in terms of the renewable requirements and in terms of other requirements. I will continue to take that posture working with the -- all the Members with the expectation that we want to pass an energy bill, we want to pass a unified energy bill that deals with global warming as well as energy independence, and that will continue to be my role.

Q And the transmission of --

Mr. Hoyer. I would certainly -- I just introduced it. Obviously I don't expect necessarily it to be included in the event of a markup either this week or next week; however, I do intend to talk to Chairman Waxman and Chairman Markey about it because I think it does make sense.

I also talked to them, by the way, in terms of weighing in the offsets. I think I talked to them about that previously, because I feel very strongly that offsets are necessary to give incentives to stop -- particularly from deforestation.

I don't know whether any of you know this statistic. I think

I mentioned this a couple or 3 weeks ago that, A, we lose a football field a second of forest in the world, a second. A football field per second. Secondly, there is more carbon into the atmosphere from deforestation than all of the transportation vehicles in the world combined. Twenty percent of the carbon is as a result of -- into the atmosphere -- is a result of deforestation.

What my offset that was included in the bill -- and it is not mine, but I urged it be done -- is to give incentives. I was in Brazil, talked to a Brazilian Parliamentarian who lives in a rain forest, and he said, Congressman, it is very simple for you to say we ought to keep the forest here, but I have to feed my family. And it is nice that I have these forests, but I don't get anything from them; they don't pay me anything, they don't feed me. But if we could get some compensation through offset, then that would be good for him, good for our environment and good for passing a program.

On the transmission, briefly, my focus is on we need an upgraded grid. The bill provides for that. There are technologies available that we need to encourage which are far more efficient at transmitting electricity over long distances without losing -- normally copper wire will lose anywhere from 15 to 25 percent over stretches as it is transmitted. There is, however, technology available where you'll lose less than 3 percent and transmit a lot more effectively.

Q Back on the interrogations issue, it seems there are going to be hearings in the House and Senate. Republicans clearly are indicating they are going to want to make a focus on Pelosi and Jane Harman and Bob Graham and Rockefeller, and the Democrats will want to make it on the what the administration did, not who was told in Congress. Is that a dangerous thing that the Democrats are opening up? It is like a Pandora's box.

Mr. Hoyer. I think the facts need to get out. A lot of back and forth on this. Very frankly, the President said we weren't going to torture. The President said we weren't going to torture. I don't know a lot of people, including former members of the administration, who don't believe what was done is not properly identified as torture. That is why there is a lot of question about the three legal opinions and three lawyers who gave them.

I think the facts need to be on the table, and we ought to draw such conclusions. I think the Republicans are simply trying to distract the American public with who knew what when. My response to that is, look, the issue is not what was said or what was known; the question and focus ought to be on what was done. And that is, I think, what -- but I think, frankly, the information is about what was said and when it was said, who said it, I think that is probably what ought to be on the record as well so the American public knows that rather than what I think is somewhat of a distraction rather than a substantive debate.

Q Mr. Leader, real quickly just on the budget --

Mr. Hoyer. Let me go on that point.

Q On that point, would it be appropriate for members of leadership, for congressional leaders, to testify and be witnesses about what was said when? Mr. Hoekstra has called for Speaker Pelosi to testify and be a witness in some of these hearings. Is that appropriate?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think Ms. Pelosi is in the position where she was briefed to the extent that she was briefed, and in the brief, as I understand, that Ms. Harman was involved in, she wasn't there. But to some degree she was in a position of where, as she points out, she was bound by requirements of secrecy as a condition of those briefings. So it is a little bit of a conundrum there as well.

But again let me reiterate, the issue is what was done. If you don't have the facts pounded on the table, they are pounding on the table, or they are pounding on Speaker Pelosi. Take your pick. But they are doing so as a distraction, as a distraction from what was done in this case. Okay.

Q In terms of the budget, the President sent up kind of last little bits of the budget, including an idea for expedited rescission, 15 days to vote in the House, 8 days to vote in the Senate after it passes in the House. Limited package of rescissions, but no details beyond that. Conrad has said over there he thinks that would kind of undermine Congress' power of the purse.

What do you think of that idea of expediting a rescission, especially as it is being proposed by a Democratic President and it passed the House under Republican rule at one point?

Mr. Hoyer. I haven't seen any specifics which would be, from my standpoint, very important. I don't know what Senator Conrad said, but I expressed the view that obviously the Constitution under Article I gives to the Congress the right to appropriate, and Article II the response by the President to carry out Congress' policy.

I want to see what the expedited rescission that he talks does before commenting specifically on that. I have -- you know, in the years past, we have discussed ways in which the President of the United States would have the ability to take something out, but that that could be passed by a majority vote in the House and would become law without a signature once that was done.

So he can sign a bill -- I'm not sure exactly what this looks like, but I want to look at it before commenting further. The basic premise is that Congress has the responsibility under the Constitution to appropriate and set policy. The President under the Constitution has the authority to carry that out. If he doesn't like a bill, he can veto that, and then we can consider it. Here, the opportunity is to try to not have to veto a bill, but to say that there is a question about items in that.

Again, I will look at his proposal and see what it says. I haven't looked at it.

Q Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 11:33 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]