

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

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STENY H. HOYER

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Wednesday, May 14, 2008

11:00 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Welcome. I am pleased to be the majority leader of an ever-expanding majority. We have three new Democrats. We have turned three red districts to blue districts. We have won our third straight special election. This was not a squeaker in a district that the Republicans thought was a slam-dunk. Mr. Childers won 54-46, and won 19 of the 24 counties. It is my understanding the NRCC spent 20 percent of its cash-on-hand on this election, and of course 527s spent very, very substantial sums of money.

Americans want change, and recognize that the Democrats are the ones to give them that. That is not rhetoric, that is not polling data, that is three elections in a row, in the Hastert seat, in the Baker seat, now the Wicker seat. So there is no confusion as to where we are.

A new Washington Post-ABC poll that you may have seen shows that Americans are gloomier about the direction in the country they have been at any point in 15 years, that is to say when Bush's father was President. So we are now in the front page of the Washington Post at '92 levels in terms of the public's confidence. It is ironic that we go from Bush, the father, at the lowest point to Bush, the son, at the lowest point. More than 8 in 10 say the country is headed in a wrong direction. Democrats hold a 21-point advantage over Republicans as the party best equipped to deal with the Nation's problems, the biggest advantage

since 1992, when another Bush was voted out of office. Thirty-six percent of Americans say the economy and jobs is their top concern. In effect, what they are saying is what Bill Clinton said, "It is the economy, stupid."

As gas prices soar, as grocery prices soar, as they are challenged with their mortgage payments, and as their jobs income is stuck in the mud, as their health insurance premiums are rising and we have more uninsured people, George Bush, the present President, has been saying for 6 years how his economic program, 7 years, how his economic program and his international program was making life better. Americans don't believe him. Eighty-two percent think we are going in the wrong direction, Mr. President.

Now the Democrats have shown that we are prepared to lead and we are offering solutions to the problems confronting America. Yesterday, while it was a small step on both sides of the aisle, both sides of the Capitol, by a vote of 385-25 we passed the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, freezing that, so that we are not making additional demands, which are driving up prices, and the Senate passed it 97 to 1. Unfortunately, the Republicans did not agree to the Reid request of unanimous consent to pass it through the Senate. It is an amendment to one of their bills. I would suggest that I am going to be suggesting to Leader Reid that he take our bill and ask unanimous consent to pass that and send it to the President. The President of course has said he might veto it.

We passed housing legislation; housing legislation which seeks to make sure that Americans get some help staying in their homes, communities get help in trying to keep people in vacant homes or get people in vacant homes and to make sure there are resources so that we can counsel people. I had a town meeting attended by over 100-some odd people in Waldorf, Maryland on Friday. Clearly we had all the lenders there, we had the State there, we had local governments there, we had community groups trying to help people with their mortgages. The President's of course response to our housing bill, as it was to our energy initiative, he is going to veto it.

The student loan bill that ensures college students can afford college and can get loans this coming September passed. Hopefully, the Senate will pass it. The economic stimulus, we worked together on that. We are going to pass a budget conference report, we think, next week, and that will be the first time in an election year in some period of time that a budget conference report has passed. I think probably 2000 was the last time when we passed it. Bill Hoagland, Republican staffer on the Budget Committee, formerly, not now, said, "If they pass it," meaning our budget resolution, "it will be a major accomplishment that we weren't able to achieve when we were in the majority."

The Democrats in the House of Representatives have been moving substantive legislation to help people and help our economy and address the major problems confronting our country. That is

why there is a 21-point gap between those who say they want to see Democrats making policy as opposed to those who want to see Republicans making policy.

People want change. They want a new direction. They voted for only one-third of the change makers in 2006; not the majority in the Senate and not the President of the United States. This year, in November, they are going to have an opportunity to vote for change makers as the majority in each one of the decision makers elements of our government: The presidency, the Senate, as well, of course, as the House.

John Boehner, pursuant to what I call the Bush-Boehner agenda of saying no to energy, to housing, to health care, to student loans, to other issues, says he has a new mantra that he wants to effect, and that is: Change you Deserve. The change the American public are saying they deserve are Democrats.

Now Change you Deserve, interesting where he got that. It's a trademark. Change you Deserve is behind me. This is for an anti-depressant medicine. This is Boehner's Change you Deserve, anti-depressant. Democrats, not drugs, is what the American people need.

Now, based on these studies, the drug company says the common side effects of Effexor, the side effects of Effexor are, and this is what Mr. Boehner wants, Change you Deserve; nausea, up to 58 percent. Actually, it's higher than that for Republicans. It's closer to 72 percent. Headache. This administration and

this Republican Congress for the first 6 years certainly has given America a headache. Drowsiness. America is starting to wake up to the change they want and they are reflecting in poll after poll after poll, including the last three elections, they know how to get out of drowsiness and get the change they want. There are all sorts of other adverse effects to the Boehner Change you Deserve.

So, ladies and gentlemen, we believe that Democrats are the change they deserve, not the same old tired policies that have so miserably failed abroad and at home.

Moving on quickly, the Iraq supplemental will be on the floor on Thursday. It provides in title I funding for our troops, in title II a new policy, a change in direction in Iraq, redeploying our troops, having a plan for success and focusing on the war on terrorism in Afghanistan; and thirdly, addressing some of the domestic priorities that we believe are essential for us to address, including unemployment insurance.

Clearly, our economy is having substantial challenge, and we need to focus on the needs of those who are unemployed, and our bill does that. In addition, we want to make sure that those veterans returning from Iraq, those veterans serving at this point in time when we are at war get the same kind of benefits that we gave to our GIs in World War II and other wars.

We have included in this bill an effort to do that and to give substantial college and education benefits to our returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and others who are serving in

support of our effort in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are going to pay for that with the Patriot premium, which will be half a point on those individuals making over half a million and those couples making over \$1 million. That will generate sufficient funds.

Those veterans will come back, they will make our economy better, as the World War II vets did, because they are participating in college. It is a great investment in growing the economy. Every businessman that I talked to, or woman, says that.

Lastly, on the farm bill, then we will stop and go to questions. The farm bill will be on the floor today. We believe that is a bill that will do some very good things for our country, including at a time when people are having real crisis in their families and food prices are escalating very rapidly, giving substantial additional nutritional aid in the food stamps to make sure that in the richest country on Earth people aren't going hungry. In addition, it will invest substantial sums in conservation.

A parochial aside, it will provide \$438 million over 10 years for the Chesapeake Bay, one of America's great estuaries and assets. So we are very pleased with that. I think that bill is going to get a substantial number of votes on both sides of the aisle. The President's response is, of course, as his usual response is, starting just a few months ago; i.e., February of 2007, because before that he only vetoed one bill, now almost every bill that comes down the pike that seeks to address problems

that Americans know they have, the President says he will veto.

Questions.

Q A veto-proof margin on the farm bill?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know the answer to that question. But it's possible. Mr. Peterson thinks it is very possible to get 300 votes on that. We will see. I haven't been counting votes.

Q Is there more than a hint of hypocrisy in going through all the gesticulations to get for paying for the GI benefits with PAYGO, but then waiving PAYGO in consideration of this farm bill?

Mr. Hoyer. Actually, we don't have to waive, except technically. The difference is the rules in the Senate and the House are different, and one deals with the 2009 budget, one deals with the 2008 budget. We haven't passed a 2009 budget. We are going to base it on the 2008 budget. It doesn't need waiver on the 2008 budget.

Do you understand? So technically, but we are going to base it on the 2008 budget.

Q You are saying it's just a technical violation, but the Republicans say that actually it's --

Mr. Hoyer. I am surprised that the Republicans would say that they don't agree with us on this. Let's see what they do on the GI Bill. The GI Bill is going to be paid for. It's going to be on the floor paid for. Let's see what they do. Let's see whether it's just crocodile tears that they don't want to reach out and pay for anything, as they have not, which is why we have

escalated by almost \$4 trillion the national debt on their watch.

Q On the GI Bill, the pay-for, have you talked to the Senate leaders at all about that?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q Have they said they are confident they can get it through their Chamber, that they support it?

Mr. Hoyer. I have not seen the Senate confident about almost anything over the last year and a half. They are going to try hard. Confidence would overstate it. Let me tell you why. The Republican strategy in the House and in the Senate is to make sure we don't do anything to the extent that they can possibly affect that. Obstructionism is their policy, obstructionism is their politics, obstructionism is their performance.

So they can claim we are not doing anything. I just read to you a number of things that we have done. And when we work together, when the Republicans decide -- when they thought they needed to do something because there was no alternative and the economy was really in trouble and they were politically in trouble, they came together and worked with us on the stimulus package. Most times they don't do that. But when they do that, and if they do that, we can accomplish good things for the American people.

Q As bad as it looks for Republicans right now, you described the three races that you all won.

Mr. Hoyer. First time in 30 years that happened.

Q And 82 percent, all those numbers you described, the fact that John McCain is running a shade ahead of either Senator Clinton or Senator Obama, can you talk about his strengths, frankly? It should be the opposite.

Mr. Hoyer. Can I talk about John McCain's strengths? I guess I could, but I probably won't.

Q Over 15 points behind.

Mr. Hoyer. Let me explain that. I have an explanation for that. Right now, the Democrats are still in the process of resolving our primary, and therefore the focus is essentially between two candidates who are contending with one another and trying to show that relatively small but nuanced differences between them in order to appeal to the Democratic electorate.

John McCain essentially is out there by himself. Nobody is really attacking him. I don't mean that Obama or Clinton haven't said things about him, but he is essentially out there by himself. Fairly soon, and you asked me when, and I don't know when, but fairly soon, and this could be the next month, next 2 months, next 3 months, but at some point in time there is going to be a choice the American public will have to make between 4 more years of the Bush administration, and John McCain agrees with him on his economic program, he has voted with him on most issues in the Congress, and he certainly is saying that the economic policies of the President are things that he would promote. He said that.

The American public is going to focus on that at some point

in time in the near future, and every one of these polls and these three elections reflect the fact they want change, not 4 more years of the same Bush-Boehner policies, and very frankly, in my opinion, the numbers are going to change substantially.

Mr. McCain has continued to move to the right, then to the left. And I saw Bill Bennett on television this morning, said that the right was now, again, very upset with him, as they have been upset with him. So the base of his party views him with suspicion.

Q Mr. Hoyer, on the supplemental, if this thing goes to the Senate and they take out the pay-for and send it back to the House for the GI Bill, will this whole dispute we have had be somewhat academic?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, it may be. We want to pay for it. The policies of the House of Representatives and Democrats is to pursue PAYGO, and we have pursued PAYGO. I think it is right that we pursue PAYGO. And I want to stress that the Speaker and I are in lockstep on that. We are both committed to pursuing PAYGO and getting a handle on our deficit and having responsible fiscal policies.

The Senate has trouble getting 60 votes. You will recall on AMT every Democrat voted for paying for the AMT last year. But they couldn't get to 60. So there is a solution to that, and the American public are pursuing it and I think you are going to see a substantial number of new Democrats in the United States Senate

next year.

Q The win by Cazayoux and Childers seems to strengthen the Blue Dogs, and what the supplemental debate seems to be about is PAYGO. Talking about the substantial numbers looking ahead to next year, do you envision a situation in which the Blue Dogs really would take down a bill like this, take down something as important as this if their numbers grow to a real substantial level? Is there actually sort of a problem in numbers?

Mr. Hoyer. No, I don't think so. I think, frankly, our party is a broad-based party. It has always been a broad-based party, unlike the Republican Party that has had a much narrower base historically, and frankly now we are a very diverse party. You look at our leadership, it is a diverse party. You look at the membership of our caucus, it is a diverse caucus. You don't see that on the other side of the aisle.

The fact is that the ideological diversity is more apparent than real. What do I mean by that? Childers ran on kitchen-table issues, on pocketbook issues for people in the 1st Congressional District of Mississippi. That is what he ran on. I will tell you that every member of the Democratic Caucus essentially believes those are the issues, which are our issues.

Now when you talk about PAYGO, the Blue Dogs prevailed on that. But, again, what did I just stress? Speaker Pelosi and I, now I am close to the Blue Dogs, and the Speaker, you ask a Blue Dog, the Speaker has been with them on this PAYGO issue from the

very beginning. So there is not a division ideologically on PAYGO. Does it make some people uncomfortable, is it difficult to implement? It is. But it is important if we are going to reach fiscal responsibility to do so.

So the answer to your question is I am not worried. I welcome the fact that we have additional Members from Mississippi, Louisiana, and Speaker Hastert's seat from Illinois to join us in coming together on behalf of working men and women in this country, and the kitchen-table issues that are important to them and their families.

Q Speaking of the Blue Dogs, is there any concern -- or how concerned are you that they could pose a problem with the war supplemental?

Mr. Hoyer. I think they are going to vote for the supplemental. We just talked about that. I think they are going to vote for the supplemental. I think they are going to vote for the rule. I mean I can't predict -- there are three elements to the supplemental, as you know. I believe we are going to pass certainly the last two elements, and the first element will pass probably, but not with a majority of Democrat votes, minority of Democrats' votes but a majority of Republicans' votes.

Q When it comes back to the Senate it will be stripped out.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, that is your assumption.

Q A pretty good one.

Mr. Hoyer. It is a pretty good one, but it is an assumption. It hasn't happened yet. I think we will pass the supplemental.

Q Will it need a rule when it comes back from the Senate?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q Do you think it will get done before Memorial Day?

Mr. Hoyer. I hope so. Depends upon -- again, back to your question, am I confident? I am hopeful.

Q Do you see that as a deadline, the Memorial Day recess?

Mr. Hoyer. No, but I tell you what a deadline is, probably the 15th of June or somewhere in that nature, and we would like to pass it by Memorial Day simply because there is a requirement of course that notices go out and DOD says it is going to have -- it may hit that notice requirement. We are going to pass this.

Q Mr. Hoyer, the Colombian Government has agreed to the extradition of 14. Is that a development that could help move the consideration of the FTA in the House?

Mr. Hoyer. I think it is a very positive development. I think the Uribe government continues to pursue trying to enforce a more stable environment, and go after those, whether they are paramilitaries or FARC, who are committing crimes, not just what they call their revolution. We believe FARC is a terrorist organization. The paramilitaries have pursued criminal behavior. We believe -- I believe, I don't say we -- I believe the Uribe administration is making very honest and effective, not as effective as he would like to be, not effective as we would like

them to be, so the answer to your question is yes, I think it is helpful.

Q Could it change prospects?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, you know, it is certainly helpful.

Q Has there been any movement on the scheduling of a vote?

Mr. Hoyer. On that?

Q Yes.

Mr. Hoyer. No.

Q Sir, on FISA, the solution of referring the civil court cases to the FISA court to then determine whether they should be able to go forward, is that a solution that works for you?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know -- are you referring to something specific?

Q Originally it was Senator Feinstein's proposal. I understand it's being discussed.

Mr. Hoyer. There is discussion about that. And FISA, we certainly have had some positive discussions with the White House, with the Senate, with Chairman Rockefeller, who has been very helpful. Senator Bond has been very forthcoming in terms of what he believes is necessary to move forward. I have been having discussions with some of the Republican leadership here on that issue. And we are working very hard to try to see if we can move this forward.

Now you ask specifically is that part of the solution. Obviously we are dealing with title II, which is the title you are

referring to, and we are dealing with how do you determine what was done, and that is still subject of discussion. But the alternative you mentioned is certainly one that is on the table.

Q Is there any discussion about bringing back stem cells this summer in some shape or form, either -- the Senate I think has an override hanging out there. They might be a vote short. There's another bill I think coming. Is there any discussion about having that be an issue?

Mr. Hoyer. There has been discussion. There are no plans of doing that at this point in time. We feel, as you know, that stem cells, and there have been some obviously scientific developments since then, but on our side we believe that, for the most part, not everybody, that stem cells, and there is bipartisan votes for this, stem cell research poses opportunities to cure some of mankind's more debilitating diseases, and that it ought to be pursued, and we believe that. The President has obviously not agreed with us.

Q Has Senator Reid suggested to you that he may bring back a vote on his side on that?

Mr. Hoyer. We haven't had that discussion.  
Anything else?

Q Mr. Hoyer, on FISA, when do you think is the deadline? What is the deadline?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think there is a deadline. I was hopeful that we could get this done, as you know, by Memorial Day. I

mentioned that a number of times. We have had discussions. Sometimes I think it is possible to move them more quickly, and other times I think that we have slowed down. I think the reason for that is on both sides their need for substantial discussion with proponents and opponents.

I don't think there is a deadline. If there is a deadline, it probably is August 1 in terms of the orders that were issued under the Protect America Act. But some of those were issued, we think, substantially later than August 1, so they will be in place for longer than that. We are still working very hard to try to get it done as soon as possible. If we could get it done next week, I would be happy. But the discussions are still ongoing.

[Whereupon, at 11:30 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]