

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

\*\*\*

Tuesday, May 15, 2007

11:00 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning. How is everybody today?  
Terrific. I am glad to hear that, Mr. Cohen.

Q Thank you, sir.

Mr. Hoyer. Let me start by -- and I will say something on the floor a little later, and I know a number of other people will as well -- we have in the House of Representatives, both the Members and the press, have been extraordinarily advantaged by a wonderful woman who has for 34 years assisted us in making sure we had a forum for communication and a dialogue with one another. And she has treated us all I think with great respect and we all think she is just a terrific human being. And Tina Tate, I want to thank you for all you have done for all of us for those 34 years.

[Applause. ]

Mr. Hoyer. One of the great things about working on the Hill is that you work with a lot of really good, decent people. We get heated a lot of times on the floor, but it is a real privilege to work with so many people who really care about their country and care about the work that they are doing, including all of you. And, unfortunately, the public sees just us sort of screaming and the gnashing of teeth, and they get a somewhat jaundiced view. Of course, inside, we get somewhat of a jaundiced view from time to time ourselves.

In any event, Tuesday, today we are going to do 16 suspension bills, including the COPS bill. At the outset, let me say that we are going to do one less suspension bill than we had planned. We decided because of the controversy, it is a very good bill, but Danny Davis' bill, the Second Chance Act, we pulled that bill from the suspension calendar. But I'm going to be working with Mr. Davis. I talked to him, members of the Judiciary Committee and Mr. Sensenbrenner and as well Mr. Coble and Mr. Pence, with whom I have talked, who are very strongly for the bill. It is an excellent bill, but we need to make sure that we can pass the bill. And there were some who were -- we had it on the suspension calendar. Obviously, as you know, we need 290, give or take, depending on who is voting. And we wanted to make sure that passes.

The COPS bill is on the floor. This week is National Police week. In 40 minutes, we will be having -- as we do annually -- a ceremony on the West Front memorializing those whose lives have been lost in the defense of a stable democracy in this country, our police officials. Unfortunately, we have lost over 16,000, 17,000 in that neighborhood, police officers since the foundation of our country, and we will remember some of them today.

The COPS bill is part of an effort to try to make sure that we have sufficient police on the street. An initiative by the Clinton administration strongly supported by Democrats

and many Republicans. This bill deals particularly with hiring grants. They were sharply reduced under Republican congresses.

We see a rise in crime as all of you know. We believe that the COPS program and the neighborhood policing program and the partnership that the Federal Government created with the local governments in increasing the complement of police officers in jurisdictions -- I know that they did in mine and in every jurisdiction around the country -- was helpful in having a police presence in neighborhoods which we think very substantially helps crime fighting and brings crime down.

The bill reinvigorates this program, and will put 50,000 additional police officers on the street over the next 6 years. So we are strongly for that. We think it will pass handily. We hope that it passes and the President signs it.

The DOD authorization bill will be on the floor. That is the other big piece of legislation that will be on the floor. It will take a couple of days. There are 130-plus amendments I think last count. So 120-plus amendments that have been noted to the Rules Committee. They have not yet had time to digest the requests that have been made.

But obviously this bill is particularly focused on military readiness. I want to tell you that I had a conversation with a high-ranking official, one of the highest-ranking military officials. And I essentially

posited a question: Do we need more troops in Iraq? The answer was we don't have any more troops. That's a pretty stark answer in a country that confronts challenges throughout the world. That we have put ourselves in a place where we are essentially without further resources to put into efforts that we might have to make.

In fact, Barney Frank pointed out at the chairman's meeting this morning that the Department of Defense in responding to the escalation of civilian casualties in Afghanistan has explained that because of the shortage -- I don't know that they used the term shortage, so I'm not quoting on that -- but the insufficiency of troops on the ground, we are relying on air power. And air power, of course, is more likely to cause civilian collateral deaths and injuries than would necessarily ground fire.

This bill is designed to try to meet that issue. As you know, it calls for an increase in troops both in terms of the Army and the Marines. I think it is 36,000 Army and 9,000 Marines. Frankly, in my opinion, it needs to be substantially more than that, but that's what the committee has recommended at this point in time.

It makes the troops in the field the priority and preserves our ability to respond to threats. Readiness components, as you probably know, the new Defense Readiness Production Board, which is going to oversee where we are in

terms of equipment, \$1 billion strategic readiness fund for critical new procurements and authorizes a billion dollars for National Guard equipment needs. We know that the National Guard equipment has been very substantially utilized in the Iraq and Afghanistan efforts.

Obviously, there was a substantial question raised in Kansas when the tornado that extraordinarily attacked, that was a natural phenomenon, but nevertheless with very serious adverse consequences. We know that Governor Sebelius posited that one of the problems in responding as effectively and vigorously as she thought was necessary was that so much of the equipment and manpower of the Kansas National Guard was overseas in Iraq.

The third thing we will do is the GSE's reform. Chairman Frank is reporting out a bill creating a new entity, the Federal Housing Finance Agency, which will oversee Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac and the Federal Home Loan Bank system; creates also an affordable housing fund that is in the neighborhood of \$600 or \$700 million this coming fiscal year. To create affordable housing with the priority on that first year's housing money being to the Gulf Coast, those who suffered under Katrina.

Lastly, I am hopeful that the supplemental might be on the floor next week. I am hopeful that the budget conference could be on the floor this week. We don't know that, but

Mr. Spratt and Mr. Conrad have been working very hard. I think we have agreed on numbers. There is still some disagreements between the House and the Senate, but I think they are very close. And I am hopeful that we will be able to bring the conference committee to the floor this week.

Notwithstanding that, Mr. Obey is going to pursue the appropriations process, and there will be some subcommittee markups this week and next week. There will be no appropriation bills -- contrary to our original plan -- on the floor out of the full committee before the Memorial Day break.

Okay. Your turn.

Q Do you anticipate an amendment to the Defense authorization bill that would address either cutting off funding for the war or bringing home troops?

Mr. Hoyer. There clearly are -- I frankly have not seen the list of amendments, but I do know that such amendments are being offered. I don't want to anticipate at this point in time until we see what amendments have been offered. And the reason I say that is the supplemental is pending. Obviously, we have what was almost unanimously supported by Democrats in the conference going to the Senate, which deals with benchmarks and deals with reporting of the President and reconsideration of the fenced part of the money, about \$55 billion as opposed to the \$42 billion in July, as you

know; the July 13th report and then subsequently vote on the Defense appropriation bill.

Whether or not the authorization bill -- I've talked about the authorization bill. This is an opportunity for members to express their policy preferences. And certainly I would expect the Rules Committee to consider which amendments they want to make in order.

Let me say this: I know Chairman Skelton, as I am sure all of you have heard, is very concerned that the President's threatened veto of the supplemental appropriation may impact on his bill. And I know he is very interested in getting his bill signed. His bill was reported out of committee probably as you know, 58 to zero. Very bipartisan bill. And so I think that is going to play into Chairman's Skelton's recommendations to the Rules Committee, and I do not want to anticipate. Chairman Skelton voted with the Democratic alternative in terms of fencing and reporting. So we will see what he recommends.

Q Just a quick question --

Q There are several amendments on the Defense authorization bill that require --

Mr. Hoyer. On the Defense?

Q On the Defense authorization bill that were supported last night that required congressional authorization for any military operations in Iran. And I know that something

similar was supposed to be on the supplemental but was taken out. Do you think it has more chance of passing this time around, and would you support something like that?

Mr. Hoyer. Let me say that I believe that any action anywhere that is not a response to an attack on the United States requires congressional authorization. I have made that point, whether it is Iran or any other country. Assuming it is not a response to an attack, in which case I think the commander in chief has the authority. But if it is not, I don't think that he can go into Iran or any place else without that authorization.

I am sure that is an amendment that will be carefully considered by the Rules Committee and whether it will be in a discrete form or a broad form, I frankly don't know whether a broad form amendment, that is to say reiterating what I think is a constitutional premise that only Congress can authorize the country to an active attack or war with another entity or another Nation.

Q There is a good chance the immigration -- I'm sorry.

Q On the GSE --

Mr. Hoyer. You could have gone.

Q I forgot. Given that the number of amendments in the Defense authorization bill, do you think the GSE bill might get pushed into next week or at least to Friday?

Mr. Hoyer. At least to Friday, we are going to be here

Friday.

Q Thank you.

Mr. Hoyer. I am laughing only because you can imagine my colleagues, Republican and Democrat, talk to me regularly about whether we are going to be here on any Friday.

Q There is a good chance that the immigration deal is just going to collapse in the Senate today, and they are not going to be able to move to any bill after the Republican filibuster. Would that mean that immigration does not happen? Or is the House willing to take up an immigration bill if the Senate cannot?

Mr. Hoyer. I've spoken to this before. It is our hope and belief that in terms of the best process, because the Senate had reached a consensus in the last Congress, that the Senate would move first on this legislation.

Having said that, I talked to Mr. Conyers, the Speaker, and the leadership have talked about it. It is our expectation that we will have an immigration bill on the floor in July.

Now, could that change depending upon what the Senate does? It could change, but at this point in time, whether the Senate acts in the next day or so or week will not necessarily impact that decision. We believe that immigration -- we have talked to the President about it; it is one of the things that we think we can work with the

President on that would be a positive step. We believe that the Gutierrez-Flake bill is a positive step.

That does not necessarily mean that that is the bill that will be passed out of the subcommittee. The subcommittee chair, Zoe Lofgren, is working this bill very hard with Republicans and Democrats to see whether or not we can put it in a shape to address what is a very serious question. I would reiterate that there is almost -- there is certainly consensus on security at the borders. Everyone believes that we cannot have porous borders either from a national security standpoint or from a domestic policy standpoint. Domestic health care, social services, education, all of those are impacted by immigration. We need to control our borders and the second is more contentious, and that is, what do you do with those who are here?

Q You have said that you hope the supplemental conference report would be on the floor next week, which suggests that you are not certain about that. Are you certain that Congress is going to go on its Memorial Day recess if that bill doesn't pass?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to comment on that because I am not certain of that. I believe and I have said and Speaker Pelosi has also expressed our hope that we pass a supplemental that the President can sign by the Memorial Day break.

Q Has this issue not been decided or are you just hoping that it gets done and you don't have to confront it?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think -- we are not anticipating failure at this point in time, which means that it has not been decided in case you wanted, you know, interpretation from the Greek.

Q Have you whipped the Frank GSE bill?

Mr. Hoyer. Have we whipped it?

Q Yes.

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know whether Mr. Clyburn is whipping it at this point in time or not. However, we're going to whip it, and we do want to pass it, and we think it will have bipartisan support.

Q You mentioned there not being any appropriations bills before Memorial Day. What does that do with the prospects of getting all the bills done by July?

Mr. Hoyer. It is our intent to move the other 11 appropriation bills on the floor in June. June will be a -- I have advised my members that June is going to be one of the hardest-working months that we will have in terms of every Monday and every Friday, assuming we need them.

If we should accelerate appropriation bills and do the complement of appropriation bills we have scheduled for that week and get them through by Thursday night, we may have one Friday off or maybe two Fridays off in June. And that would

be a bonus, but it will only occur if we complete the appropriations bill.

It is my intent and it is Mr. Obey's intent and the Speaker's intent to do all but the Defense appropriation bill in the month of June through the House.

Q Mr. Leader, if your hope is, notwithstanding, that you want to get a bill on the Iraq supplemental, you want to get war funding up before Memorial Day. But if you don't, are you concerned about how it will look to the American people if you are going on recess on a Memorial Day holiday designed to honor the war dead, if you don't have funding?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think that is probably self evident by the fact that I emphasized that we need to pass it by the Memorial Day break. And the answer to your question is yes.

But let me make it -- let me emphasize what all of you know. We passed and sent to the President a bill which fully funded his request plus some additional dollars for Afghanistan. It did not micro manage the troops. General Petraeus could go in, out, over, east, west, do whatever he wanted to do with the troops. It did not micro manage the troops. It didn't impact anything in the short term.

It required reports. It required accountability. It required waivers if they didn't follow DOD guidelines in terms of deployment and training, down time here at home. The President chose to veto that bill because he wanted a

clean, give-me-the-money-don't-ask-any-questions bill. We are not prepared to do that. We don't think the American people want us to do that.

Now, obviously, we want to pass it now, but we have passed a bill. The Republicans did not pass a bill until June 15th or 16th last year. They took -- I had the figure off the tip of my tongue, 111 days longer than we have taken. So even if we broke and came back and passed it the first week in June, we would be ahead of the schedule that the Republicans pursued when they controlled all of the levers and there was no veto.

So we have already passed a bill, supplemental bill, significantly earlier than the Republicans did in the last Congress funding the troops. So, from that standpoint, while I think we ought to do it prior to Memorial Day break, we are ahead of the schedule of the Republicans last year, and there was no veto. So they only sent one bill and he signed it. Of course they sent him exactly what he wanted. And even to send him exactly what he wanted took them over 100 days.

Q Who do you think would take the blame on this? The Congress or the presidential veto? Sometimes it plays the other way.

Mr. Hoyer. Yes, you know what I think really? Everybody. I think the American public would hold everybody accountable, as they should, for not doing that. But I

reiterate, we passed a bill, he vetoed it and we are now trying to come back for the second bill. We don't think the American public expects us to send a blank check. We have all said it and said it, it is getting trite and you are tired of hearing it. But the President wants us to send what he asks for. That is not what the Congress was set up to do. The Congress was set up to make policy. The President was set up to execute policy. Now he plays a significant policy role because he has the veto. We can't override his veto so we have to come to agreement, and we're going to try to do that.

Q Mr. Leader, you just mentioned that you were not sending the President what he has asked for, but you also said you wanted to send the President a bill that he can sign. How far are you willing to go in doing that? What do you have to do to get that done, especially if you are not going to send him exactly what he wants?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, of course, now he is saying that he has modified his own position. The Republicans are modifying their position very rapidly. The President is losing support in the Congress. He had a meeting with Republicans, significant senior Republicans, last week. They were pretty blunt with him: Mr. President, you are not reflecting what we hear at home, the views of the American public.

And the President has now said the benchmarks are a

pretty good idea. You know, the reed on which he vetoed the last bill gets thinner and thinner.

Q Do you think you could get those 11 Republicans who went to the White House to support a Democrat supplemental?

Mr. Hoyer. I think they could support a supplemental which they thought did not put a time line, which is, as the President said, that is his line in the sand, but established benchmarks with economic consequences; perhaps not with troop movement consequences but with economic consequences to the Iraqis. I think you hear them talking about that in the Senate and in the House. Olympia Snowe is talking about it -- who is she working with?

Q Senator Bayh.

Mr. Hoyer. Senator Bayh.

Q Do you think that something like that could pass in the House?

Mr. Hoyer. Oh, yeah.

Q Do you think that the Senate this idea that is being floated for a timetable --

Mr. Hoyer. I want to make it clear that I don't think that is what I think is going to the House floor. I think, frankly, the Congress has -- not just Democrats or Republicans, but elected responsibility. You have heard me say this before. We have troops in the field. Speaker Pelosi and I have said we're not going to abandon our troops

in the field. We are going to fund those troops we have in the field. We're going to do it. And we have to do it through some agreement, we will do it.

In July, we are going to have the appropriation bill on the floor, with or without a Presidential report. I happen to believe that the Republicans would sign on to and in fact have articulated the requirement of a report, whether it is every 30 days, whether it is July 15th report, whatever it is.

Who did I cut off? Let me do Dave.

Q Just following up on all of this, and I indulge my colleagues for saying this if I missed it. There is beginning to be criticism of your party and your leadership for not getting enough done after the promises you made. Surprise. Surprise.

Mr. Hoyer. That is by a group that was not criticizing us before?

Q Of course, never before.

But the fact is there is no immigration reform bill. The ethics reform package seems to be running into problems. There is concern that maybe some of the leaders don't want to go as far as they said at one point, the bundling issue and so farther.

What do you say about the fact, at this point in time, if we leave for Memorial Day, there really has not been a

major accomplishment by your side?

Mr. Hoyer. All as a result of either the President's veto or Republicans in the Senate preventing legislation from moving forward because they need 60 votes. That's what I say.

[Note of Clarification: The Lobbying Reform bill is anticipated to include all of the major elements of the Honest Leadership, Open Government Act, but please note the legislation was not in its final form at the time of the pen and pad.]

Number two, let me say with respect to the reform bill, I thought I brought it in here, but I don't see it right this second. On our Honest Government Open Leadership bill, every item that we put in there is going to be in our reform bill. Every one. Bundling was not in there. There has been some discussion about that, obviously, and we are working on that. How to do it; it is very complicated proposition, who reports how you report, what you report. I mean, it's not a simple thing to figure out. How you do it? And we have been grappling with that.

But in terms of what we said, Dave, everything is currently in the bill and is not in dispute. Everything that we said that we were going to do in Honest Government Open Leadership is in there. And we are going to hopefully bring that to the floor; my expectation, we are going to bring it

to the floor next week. It is being marked up in Judiciary this week.

Q How do you think that --

Q Back on the Iraq bill, were you surprised that 169 Democrats voted for the McGovern amendment?

Mr. Hoyer. Not very.

Q Is that the increasing sentiment of the caucus? Is that going to make it harder for you to bring a compromise bill with the Senate on the supplemental to the floor for a vote?

Mr. Hoyer. No, I think there was -- I think we have been trying to make a very strong statement on the fact that, Mr. President, it is time to change your policy. The President has made the determination not to do so. I think the people wanted to make a strong statement on that. They did. But I don't think that precludes, which is your question, passing something short of that through the Congress of the United States out of conference, which is short of that objective. But I think it was a very strong message.

Q Why did you not support the vote?

Mr. Hoyer. I determined that, in my view, it had no benchmarks in there, which we have required or reporting requirements in there, both of which I support. And I believe that the proposal that we had made, which I did support as you know, was preferable.

Q How do you think that bundling should be handled?

Mr. Hoyer. How do I think bundling should be handled? Bundling is difficult. I said it was difficult. The reason it is difficult to handle is because, first of all, defining what bundling is is difficult. Is bundling saying I am going to go to a fundraiser for Steny Hoyer, why don't all of you go as well? Is that bundling if they go? And if so, how does a Member determine that they went because somebody talked to them, the lobbyist A, B or C?

Secondly, if the lobbyists report, does that let Members off the hook from reporting? If Members report, does that let lobbyists off? If lobbyists and Members report, and they have a conflict, what does that do to either? Because you know, it is, to some degree, nuanced as to how you bundle. Clearly, I collect 10 checks and I take them to member A and give them the 10 checks; clearly that is bundling. But when you get below that, it is difficult to articulate, and we're trying to do that, Chris Van Hollen has been working very hard on that. He has been the point on that.

Q Do you think there should be any reporting?

Mr. Hoyer. Sure. And we will get there.

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