

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, June 19, 2007

11:30 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. All right. We will get started.

Today, we met, we went in for Morning Hour at 10:00 for legislative business. We are considering Agriculture, you know, the Energy and Water Appropriations bill. The last votes today we expect to be late afternoon.

Wednesday, we will meet at 10:00, giving consideration to the State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bill. Under a rule, there are no earmarks in that bill. There are no earmarks, by the way, in any of these bills that we are considering this week.

Thursday -- I say that with a caveat. You understand Energy and Water will be added later. That was the agreement. On the on the State and Foreign Operations bill, we don't expect earmarks to be in that bill.

We will meet at 10:00 on Thursday on the State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bill completion, and then the Leg Branch Appropriations bill late Thursday and/or Friday. And that will be finishing that bill. That will also be under a structured rule

Let me start for just a few minutes on the appropriations process.

The President and Mr. Portman have indicated that they are going to veto appropriations bills if they exceed the President's budget numbers. The budget numbers that the

President sent down, of course, have never been real to the extent that the administration has used extensively the supplemental appropriations process to very, very substantially -- by usually, on average, \$80 to \$100 billion a year -- increase their expenditures which is, of course, how they also avoided their caps that they imposed.

In any event, it is important to note that domestic discretion spending levels under our budget will be lower than it was every year from 2001 to 2006 relative to the size of the economy. Now, we think obviously that means, relative to GDP, what you are spending on discretionary spending at the Federal Government level. The Republicans don't like that figure except when they use it for deficits in which they have related it to GDP or their tax cuts which they have related to GDP.

Furthermore, our appropriation bills have -- totaled up, represent a 1 percent boost in real per capita terms and would still leave us well below the levels of fiscal year 2004, adjusted for inflation. The difference between our budget and the President's budget is about eight-tenths of a percent.

This administration continues to believe that the Congress' role is to rubber-stamp whatever it asks for and whatever it tells us. The American public doesn't believe that, and we certainly do not believe it. The Congress'

authority is to make judgments on what we need to invest in to make our country stronger and the lives of our families better.

In 1980, domestic programs amounted to 5.6 percent of GDP. Today, investments have declined to 2.9 percent and under the President's constrictions would be 2.4 percent. Ours would be less than 2.9, and somewhat more than 2.4, but obviously very substantially less in terms of domestic discretionary spending than we were spending in 1980.

Let me mention the three bills that are on the floor today just briefly, and I will stop and answer questions.

I am particularly pleased that the Foreign Operations bill has added money for Darfur. I took a codel, as you know, to Darfur over the Memorial Day break -- excuse me, over the Easter break in April. This bill includes \$950 million for Sudan and \$200 for critical humanitarian peacekeeping programs in Darfur.

The administration has been focused on this. I think it is one of the things that we need as a nation and the international community to focus on. If you saw the paper today, Sudan is perceived to be the most failed state on the globe right now. Iraq, number two, I think.

The Energy and Water bill we are focused on energy independence. There will be \$3 billion addressed to global climate change as well. We believe that global warming is a

critical issue; this addresses that issue.

On the Legislative Branch bill, I say this only because I have been pumping for this for the last 2 years. All of our vehicles that you see us being driven around in by security people are flex-fueled vehicles. That is wonderful. The problem is, there isn't a flex-fueled pump available. So this bill includes money for that.

Let me point out that one of the things the Republicans are trying to do is apparently get well from what they perceive to be their base's very stringent criticism of them on fiscal responsibility. George Will lambasted Republicans' fiscal record as, and I quote, "incontinent spending by a Republican-controlled Congress trying to purchase permanent power." That is George Will.

He is not, by the way, a spinmeister for the Democratic Party, in case you haven't noticed. That is as tough as it gets, I think.

The Clinton record was \$62.5 billion of surplus in 8 years. George Bush has now run up \$1.5 trillion in operating deficits over the last 6 years.

For a party that has gone from a \$62.5 billion surplus -- from a \$5.6 trillion surplus projected over 10 years to spending 1.5 trillion in deficit spending and going to a \$3 trillion 10-year deficit projection, to try to say that they are the fiscally responsible party is Alice in

Wonderland; and Lewis Carroll -- you know, I have said this on the floor -- is writing their stuff.

Let me stop with that.

Q Mr. Hoyer, a new NBC Wall Street Journal poll puts Congress' approval rating at 23 percent now, which seems to be an all-time low.

I'm wondering, are you concerned about that? Why do you think it is happening? And does the Democratic Caucus have any plans to try to change it?

Mr. Hoyer. I think there are two reasons, two major reasons -- I think, actually, three major reasons, let me say.

A, the American public in November voted for a change in direction in Iraq. And the only change in direction they have seen is the wrong direction and escalation.

Democrats obviously passed legislation through the House to disapprove the surge. We passed legislation through the House and Senate and sent to the President a bill to change direction in Iraq. He vetoed that legislation. We attempted to override that veto, but did not have the votes. So Americans believe that they voted for a Congress to change direction in Iraq, and we haven't done it yet.

We are going to continue to keep doing that, trying to do just that, because we believe that we -- that the

policies we are pursuing are disastrous, are not working, and that things are getting worse and that not to change direction is irrational. But Americans are frustrated by that.

Secondly, I think Americans voted for reform.

Let me talk about reform as it relates to -- we just went through this earmarking issue. Let me quote Jeff Flake.

"I want to compliment the Democrats for earmark reform that is stronger than the Republicans did. Democrats in this way had more guts than we did to tackle earmark reform in a meaningful way, and I compliment them for that, but I appreciate, and, again, I want to compliment the Democrats for doing stronger earmark reform than we did."

We have done stronger lobbying reform than they did. We have passed a rule that prohibits meals, gifts of any value. We have prevented -- we have prohibited flights. We have done a lot of things to make sure that it is the general interest, the people's interest, that is being focused on, not the special interests.

Now, having said that, we have not yet passed the lobbying disclosure bill. So I think those Americans who voted for us want to see a reform. While the rules are meaningful and, I think, as tough rules as have been passed by any Congress on this nexus between special interest and

general interest, I think that the public believes that we haven't passed the lobbying disclosure bills. They are correct. We need to do that.

So I think those two items in particular.

Thirdly, I think they are somewhat distressed that we have not passed the Six for '06 in a way that they want us to do. The Six for '06, as you know, got an average of 62 Republican votes, not because Republicans want to help Democrats, but because they saw the issues that we put forward were very strongly supported by the American public. Minimum wage is now signed, but it took 5 months to get it signed. It should have been signed, frankly, in a few weeks after we passed it. It should have passed the Senate without the tax cuts in there. And the President should have signed it then.

The 9/11 Commission, stem cell research, the President we understand, is going to veto that on Thursday. But we passed that. So we have moved ahead on meaningful legislation through the House of Representatives.

The Senate is trying to move ahead on legislation as well, but very frankly, the obstructionism in the Senate has prevented the Senate from moving as quickly as it wanted to on the bills that we put forward.

As a result, I think the American public -- on Iraq, on reform, and on substantive completion of work -- is

frustrated by the Congress at this point in time. But we are working very hard to accomplish all three of those objectives and we will continue to do so; and I think, frankly, the American public will see that, and we will restore their confidence in the legislative body.

Q When will you schedule the veto override vote on stem cells?

Mr. Hoyer. They haven't vetoed it yet. But we will schedule it -- I haven't discussed with the Speaker or with Diana DeGette when to schedule that vote. So I don't want to give you a definitive answer, but assuming we had a veto override vote, it will be relatively soon.

Q Can you give us some idea of what the schedule implications of the earmark deal are? It seems like you had more time --

Mr. Hoyer. You understand that was the Senate bill that we passed. So the Senate has to do it first.

Excuse me.

Q It seems like a little more time in June, since you're taking a slower pace on the appropriations, but maybe less time in July for some of the things you left for that month.

Can you give us some idea of what the outlying implications are?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, clearly, you are correct. We are not

going to pass as many appropriations bills as was my target. We are going to pass all of the appropriations bills, however, in a timely fashion.

But Labor-Health, the Transportation bill, and the Ag bill will require some time to be completed. Therefore, we won't take them up until the month of July. As a result, that will put some additional pressure on what is a relatively short month, given the July 4th break.

The implications in terms of issues, we will still hope to address a number of issues that I discussed before, some of which are moving through committee, and we are going to be discussing when we are going to move those. And so we are going to have to see what the ramifications are.

Obviously, energy bills are still very much on our scope. A&T is on our scope. Again, this is not to say they are going to be done in July, but I want -- you know, the immigration bill is still, we are still waiting on the Senate. The Senate now has taken it back. So that is on our scope.

There are a number of other bills that we are considering which I have a list of, and I perhaps am forgetting some of them right now because I didn't bring that list with me.

But election reform, we are working on that. We want to do that relatively soon. I am working with the Senate

and working with some of the groups as well, disabilities groups and the election administrators, so we can bring that to the bill.

Q On immigration, are you thinking of breaking that bill up? Some of your Republican colleagues suggest that you might vote in sections rather than on one large bill.

Mr. Hoyer. We have heard those discussions. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that we would do that. However, the subcommittee is still looking at an overall, comprehensive bill. But again, we are waiting for the Senate to act, to see what they do.

Q Are you concerned at all about that vote for some of your more conservative Members?

Mr. Hoyer. I think this is going to be a bipartisan bill, and I think that -- the President obviously is working very hard on this bill; it is one of those areas where we have an opportunity to work together with the White House on an objective.

So -- I think you are going to have a fair number of Democrats and Republicans vote against and a significant number voting for. So I think it will be -- you know, I think it will be a bipartisan bill.

Q On a couple of bills I wanted to ask for the schedule. If you know when you expect two bills -- one, FDA, the FDA reform, whether that might come up in July or

after August?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think FDA reform will be coming up in July. Again, July has been tightened because of the three appropriations bills.

Q And the other bill was --

Mr. Hoyer. Now, the medical devices and the prescription drug devices.

Q I thought there might be some reform in the PDUFA bill like there was in the Senate.

Mr. Hoyer. To that extent, yes.

Q In July?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes. We are thinking about that as a possibility in July?

Q And children's health insurance?

Mr. Hoyer. SCHIP. I should have mentioned that. SCHIP, as you know, has been on the -- it is a very important bill for us, very high priority for us. We have been working very hard for that.

We have adopted PAYGO and other significant reform, which I don't think the American public has really focused on. It is another reason they are upset with us, but -- because some of these things that we have done, they haven't focused on. But PAYGO has made a difference. It made a difference in consideration of the bills on the floor.

The D.C. bill was an example of how we really are

applying PAYGO.

But SCHIP is a very critical bill for us to pass and, yes, that is on the list for July consideration, and I would hope we could do that in July. Again, I don't want to be as definitive because of the three appropriation bills, all of which are major bills, which is why they are going over to July and therefore will take substantial time. And because we do not get back until the 9th or 10th -- is that Tuesday, the 9th? I think it is the 9th of July, that Tuesday night. It is a relatively short month.

Q Do you expect that to be a \$50 billion authorization like the Senate bill?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes. That is the number we are talking about.

Q Mr. Leader, the Senate before they go out at the end of this month wants to move -- will be doing their Defense authorization bill, and there is a bipartisan group that wants to address the habeas corpus issue on that bill. There are probably going to be efforts on Guantanamo, I know shutting down Guantanamo Bay. I am getting the feeling that the House leader -- Democratic leadership does not want to touch these issues, and I am wondering why you are shying away from it.

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think either Nancy, the Speaker, or I is shying away from these. I think we need to address

both Guantanamo Bay and habeas corpus; and I think we will.

Q This year?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes. Yes, absolutely. They are both, from my perspective, very high priority.

I will be testifying before the Helsinki Commission tomorrow on Guantanamo, I know, and I have been in discussions with both Mr. Conyers and Mr. Skelton on habeas corpus.

Q Last week, the leaders in the White House and the Senate introduced a bill that would raise taxes on private equity funds. I am just curious how much interest there is with House Democrats in doing something similar?

Mr. Hoyer. That has been an item of big discussion. You would have to ask Mr. Rangel, the chairman of the Ways and Means committee on that.

Q What are the advantages -- back on immigration -- what would be the advantages of breaking the bill?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I am not sure there are advantages. The question was, there are some people talking about it. There are some people talking about it. I am not talking about it. And that is not certainly something that at this point in time that the leadership is pushing as an option. But it is -- obviously, that is being discussed.

I don't know that there are advantages to doing it in a segmented way. This is a, you know, my position has been

this is a problem which is twofold: secure borders, which I think has universal support, our borders must be secure. We cannot have people coming into the United States that we don't know who they are, have not identified, that are not authorized to come into the country. We are the most attractive venue in the world for people to come to, and we just can't do that.

On the second issue, however, you have 12 million people here, part of which deals with -- because there is sort of a number of parts to that second issue because guest workers, H-1B visas, working towards legal status, the whole issue of how one gets into the queue for citizenship, are all wrapped up in that second part of it.

My personal view is, and the President's view obviously is, you need to deal with that together.

Q Mr. Leader, AP --

Mr. Hoyer. But the virtue of some people is they want to deal with the security issue at the border, border security, and not the second issue.

Q Mr. Leader, the AP is reporting that Rob Portman is going to be resigning and Jim Nussell will be taking his place. Do you have any reaction to that?

Do you think that your colleague, former colleague, Jim Nussell would have any effect on whether the recommendations of certain appropriations would be passed? Or what is your

take on that?

I am sure you know both well.

Mr. Hoyer. My advice to myself is not to comment on that immediately.

Q Mr. Leader --

Mr. Hoyer. You can read into that what you want to read into it, and what you read into it is correct.

Q My advice to myself, I am not reading into it anything.

Mr. Hoyer. Yeah, well, that is the first I have heard of it. My immediate reaction probably is not one that I am wise to articulate.

Q Mr. Leader, you mentioned PAYGO. Have you made a decision going back to --

Mr. Hoyer. Let me say this: Now I am thinking about it.

Q Tell us your thoughts on Jim Nussell.

Mr. Hoyer. I believe that Rob Portman is one of the best members with whom I have served. I disagree with him on a number of issues, maybe the majority of issues on which we voted. But I believe Mr. Portman to be a person of keen intellect, a responsible legislator, and a person with whom I think one could discuss substantive issues of importance and fiscal impact and have positive discussions, again, even if you didn't agree.

That is what I have to say about Mr. Portman.

What is the next question?

Q Do you have anything to say about Mr. Nussell?

Mr. Hoyer. No. Mr. Nussell is a Dane.

Q A dame?

Mr. Hoyer. A Dane.

Q Like Macbeth?

Mr. Hoyer. No. Like me. My father was born in Copenhagen. I am a first-generation American. My father came here when he was 34 years of age, in 1932, and he is a Dane. Mr. Nussell's forebears are Danes as well.

Q I thought you said a "dame."

Mr. Hoyer. That would have been a real story, wouldn't it? I could see that headline. You were just salivating at that.

No, D-A-N, as in "Nancy," E.

Q Surely you worked with Mr. Nussell when he was the chairman of the Budget Committee. You know the man very well. Can you give us some thoughts?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know Mr. Nussell very well. And I am -- I have said what I am going to say.

Q Mr. Leader, are you attending the meeting --

Mr. Hoyer. Let me say this: This administration, in my opinion, has been the most fiscally irresponsible administration in the history of our country. The Congress,

from 2001 to 2006, pursued the most fiscally irresponsible policies since I have been in the Congress of the United States.

Q Mr. Leader, are you attending the meeting with Olmert today?

Mr. Hoyer. I am.

Q Are you going to have a message going in, and do you expect Congress to try to influence maybe what aid, or some kind of policy in respect to Gaza?

Mr. Hoyer. I am sure there will be some discussion with -- obviously, there is going to be substantial discussion about the President's situation both in Gaza and the West Bank.

Mahmoud Abbas, the new Prime Minister, with whom I have met, who I think is somebody who is -- you can do business with and is responsible and wants peace and wants rational policies to be pursued by the Palestinian people. So I think it is a good appointment, the new Prime Minister.

I think that the United States' position of trying to assist Abbas is one in which I agree.

And I also think the United States policy, as I understand it, is to still provide humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people in Gaza. But I am sure there will be a lot of discussion about that.

Mr. Olmert will give us his views on where Israel

stands vis-a-vis both Abbas and the West Bank; and Hamas -- we know where we all stand with Hamas. They are a terrorist organization. If a terrorist organization takes over an area of the world, we ought not to support that area of the world while at the same time recognizing that the people of Gaza have needs and concerns and are not necessarily supportive of the terrorist regime, Hamas.

Q Mr. Speaker, you had talked previously about motions to recommit. Do you plan on revisiting those?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't have plans at this point in time. But I do have, and I don't have in front of me, but I will tell you, I will reiterate what I have said in the past:

The motions to recommit, in my view, should be related to the legislation that is under consideration. I don't think that is either irrational or unfair to have that expectation, and I continue to consider this matter in that context. But I don't have any plans to do anything right now.

Thank you.

Mr. Hoyer. Thank you all.

[Whereupon, at 12:05 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]