

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

,

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, June 26, 2007

11:33 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning. How are you?

All right, well, we are in today at 9 o'clock for morning hour, 10 for legislative business. We are on the Interior bill. The rule went quickly, as you saw. There was no vote on the rule. Took about 20 minutes on the rule. We are now into general debate. Mr. Dicks made his case for what this does for the environment, energy, investments; and we will be going into amendments fairly shortly, I guess, 15, 20 minutes.

We expect to complete the Interior appropriations bill tomorrow, and then we will do the Financial Services bill either starting late Wednesday and/or Thursday and hopefully completing that bill on Thursday. Then we will see whether we need Friday for that bill or for conference reports.

We -- I think I made this point before. We have made substantial progress during the first 6 months of the year. We have -- shortly, next month, millions of Americans will get their first pay raise in 10 years, the minimum wage. Hurricane victims in the gulf coast will be getting significant relief; and the States will be getting relief as well in terms of their matching funds, as has been done in every other disaster. We have restored PAYGO, fiscal responsibility. We have adopted a budget which, of course, the Republicans didn't do last year, which balances the

budget by 2012. We believe there is more transparency and accountability in Washington on a number of matters. And in the security area, we are working on the 9/11 Commission, and we hope that -- we are hopeful that that conference can be completed this week.

That is not assured. There are a number of items and differences still existing between the Senate and the House. I don't think they are partisan differences. There are discussions, Republicans and Democrats, on both sides. But we are hopeful that that bill can move forward.

We added armored Humvees and health care for our troops and veterans when we passed a veterans bill that was, as all of you know, the biggest increase, investment in veterans health care since the 77-year history of the Veterans Administration. That was appropriate in light of the fact that we have over the last few years had to add additional sums in supplementals in order to keep current. We hope this bill will provide for the proper level so that we can give veterans what we told them that we would give them.

In the coming months -- let me -- I want to call your attention to a quote you may have already seen. Iraq will continue to be next month, in August and September and thereafter, a continuing focus of our party and of the Congress. Iraq continues to be a failed foreign policy and military policy not because of our military but because of

the policies that have been adopted by the administration to prosecute the fight against terror and the war in Iraq.

Dick Lugar, who chaired the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Senate for some years, senior -- one of the senior Republicans in the United States Senate, said, in my judgment, the costs and risks in continuing down the current path outweigh the potential benefits that might be achieved. Persisting indefinitely with the surge strategy will delay policy adjustments that have a better chance of protecting our vital interests over the long term. Close quote.

He went on to say, quote, our course in Iraq has lost contact with our vital national security interests in the Middle East and beyond. Unless we recalibrate our strategy in Iraq, we risk foreign policy failures that could greatly diminish our influence in the region and the world.

He said that on the floor 2 days ago. That is essentially what Democrats have been saying for many months leading up to the last election and since that time, and it is the policy change that we asked for in the supplemental that we sent to the President that he vetoed. Clearly now, Senator Lugar and other Republicans are joining the ranks of those of us who have been saying for many months during this session that we need to change direction in Iraq. We will be talking about that, as I said, next month, in August and in September and thereafter, until such time as we change

the policy.

In the coming months, in addition to that, we will be talking about energy legislation, energy independence. On Thursday, there will be an announcement as to the energy legislation that we will be pressing in July, which is directed at energy independence and reducing the global warming challenge that faces us. We will be talking about implementing the 9/11 recommendations, be talking about the veterans health care on an ongoing basis, be talking about putting 50,000 more police officers in the COPS bill on the street in CJS, making colleges more affordable.

We will have a major -- we have already taken substantial action as it relates to Pell grants and college affordability. We expect to have, in the first few days when we come back after the July break, out of Mr. Miller's committee, college affordability legislation.

We also are trying to move ahead on the innovation agenda that the Speaker has put forward. We passed a number of pieces of legislation on that already, responding to the report from the National Science Foundation report headed up by Mr. Augustine saying that we had a crisis in higher education that we needed to address, particularly as it relates to engineering and the sciences.

In addition, we will continue to push a new direction in our country, even as the many of the Republicans continue

to want to rubber-stamp what the President proposes. It is interesting that we see in these first 6 months the proof of what we said, what I said in particular over the last 4 years, that the reason the President hadn't vetoed bills is because the Congress didn't do anything he didn't give his agreement to. The Congress is supposed to represent the American people, not the administration.

The President now has, as I understand it, 28 veto threats pending, and whether it is the President or his staff, including on the appropriations bills.

On the appropriations bills, as I said on the floor the other day, as Mr. Spratt has pointed out and as Mr. Obey has pointed out, we are eight-tenths of a difference in terms of our budget and the President's proposed budget. So this is not a radical difference.

We do have some differences on domestic discretionary spending. However, they have been overwhelmingly supported by a majority of the House. Homeland Security I think had 260-plus. The Veterans bill only had two votes against it. The other bills we discussed have had pretty good votes to them.

So we intend to move ahead, and we hope the President reflects upon his veto threats and -- or of his staff saying that they would recommend -- and proceeds in an orderly fashion to do America's business. That is what they sent us

here to do. That is what we intend to do.

Thank you very much.

Q Mr. Hoyer, there is talk that an announcement may be made --

Mr. Hoyer. I tried. Lord, I tried.

Q There is talk that the Democrats may be moving forward with some form of Iraq plan on the DOD bill next month. An announcement may come this week. Can you address that? Are we going to be seeing votes much earlier than we had anticipated?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think the -- I don't know how -- I don't know what you anticipated. So it is hard to say --

Q There was talk they would be in the fall.

Mr. Hoyer. -- that we are going to do it faster than you anticipated. But Mr. Murtha has in fact said that the voting on Iraq funding for the next year will occur in September. However, there are going to be -- the DOD bill will be on the floor, the possibility of a DOD conference report being on the floor. But clearly, as I pointed out, we expect to have very substantial debate, discussion about Iraq policy and the need to change Iraq policy in July, August, and September. Now, whether there are votes on funding, I don't want to anticipate. But certainly there will be action on policy.

Q So July and August?

Hoyer

Q What do you think explains --

Mr. Hoyer. Pardon? July, we are doing the Defense appropriations bill. We will be on the floor in July.

Q So are we going to see votes?

Mr. Hoyer. You may well, yes.

Q And are you talking about stopping funds or are you talking about a repeat of McGovern?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to anticipate. Specifically, Mr. Skelton, Mr. Murtha, Mrs. Tauscher, and others are all working on -- Mr. Abercrombie -- all working on various different proposals. So that we, as -- the reason I quoted Senator Lugar, obviously, his proposition is we are digging -- we keep digging the hole deeper and that our interests are not being served by digging that hole deeper. So it is our intention to, because we have been trying to do this for the last 6 months, we are going to continue to try to do it until such time as policy is changed.

Q There have been two polls in recent weeks, the Bloomberg poll and then the Gallup poll, where Congress is not held in good esteem by the public; and 64 percent of Democrats disapprove, 76 percent of Independents disapprove. Do you think that gives the Democratic Caucus the leeway to be more confrontational and more aggressive when it comes to Iraq? What explains that?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know whether that poll does. But I

think -- again, the reason I quoted Lugar is because I think Democrats have believed what Lugar has articulated for a very long time, and we have pursued policies for the first 6 months of the year to try to effect the change that he suggests. I certainly think the growing American support for changing policy gives us not only -- I wouldn't call it leeway -- incentive, and I think it is our responsibility to pursue every avenue that we can to change policy.

Q What explains that number, in your view?

Mr. Hoyer. The frustration. The frustration. You know, I said this last week. I think the frustration is that we are not getting things done that the American people thought would be done by the elections results. The problem is, of course, we didn't have an election for President; and in the Senate, we have a very, very thin majority, to say the least. One vote. And we have seen in the Senate, I think we are going to see again today, or tomorrow -- I am not sure of whether it is today or tomorrow -- an objection by McConnell to proceeding without the 60 votes on lobbying disclosure.

So I think the American public is frustrated. We are frustrated. We passed a lot of bills through the House, good legislation, supported by significant numbers, not necessarily veto-proof numbers, but a significant number of Republicans. I have made the case in the past and I believe

that this reflects their determination not that they want to support Democrats in the Congress but that they want to support legislation that is supported widely by the American public.

Q Is that frustration, at some point at least, somewhat caused by Democrats' own promises? You guys came out and said you were going to do this, this and this; and many of those things have not been accomplished.

Mr. Hoyer. We have done what we said we were going to promise. We have done what we promised. The problem, what we have not done, is made it law. And as I pointed out, A, you have a President who doesn't agree with us; and, B, you have a United States Senate that has a 49 Republicans who are not willing to allow stuff to move ahead and can stop Mr. Reid, the majority leader, from bringing things to the floor if he doesn't have 60 votes.

Q On trade, the Peru Free Trade Agreement, what do you see as the prospect for floor action before August recess as the administration requested? Or what is the timeline?

Mr. Hoyer. We will have to see what -- Peru, as I understand it, this week is considering carrying out the understandings that we had, that Charlie Rangel and others reached with the administration on the protection of workers' rights and the environment. So if that is accomplished, I think it is possible that we will look at

Peru and Panama next month. But that has not been accomplished, so we don't have that on the schedule at this point in time, and we need to discuss that further once it is accomplished.

Q How strong --

Mr. Hoyer. Mr. Rangel has not asked that it be scheduled at this point in time because it hasn't been effected at this point.

Q If those Congresses do act this week, how likely would that possibility be, would you say?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think certainly our understanding was that -- I think, with the administration, I think that Mr. Rangel believes that if they effect the changes in the agreement that were contemplated by the agreement between the administration and ourselves, which was essentially saying Democrats are not going to consider trade bills unless they have worker rights protections and environmental protections in them, if that is effected, our expectation is those two agreements will move ahead. Whether it is July or not, we will have to see what the schedule is.

Q On that China currency, is that a possibility this year, or what sort of time frame during the current Congress would you expect?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't have a time frame on that. I haven't discussed that with Mr. Rangel at this point in

time.

Q Sir, as to the appointment of Mr. Nussle, could you expound a little bit on what that means for the upcoming appropriations fights?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think the honest answer to that is that Mr. Nussle, during his term in the Congress of the United States, was not known for working in a bipartisan fashion, was not known for trying to reach accommodation, was known much more for confrontation and pressing for a Republican fiscal agenda, which I believe is a failed agenda. I do not think it bodes well for trying to move the American public's agenda forward by replacing Mr. Portman, who was somebody who wanted to see progress and did in fact work together in a bipartisan fashion.

Now, I will say this. Mr. Nussle has called me. He called me shortly after our last week's press conference. Somebody told that him I accused him of being a Dane, and I don't know who it was, but I said, yes, I did. So we will see.

Q Did he refute?

Mr. Hoyer. No, he didn't refute that. Heaven forbid that anybody refute that accolade. If the past is prologue, the future doesn't look bright for agreement. And I think that is -- a number of people have said that. Mr. Obey had said that. Mr. Nussle was not somebody who during his term

in Congress who was very inclined to work together towards bipartisan solutions.

Q I had an immigration question and also a Vice President Cheney question. Immigration --

Mr. Hoyer. Is he emigrating?

Q To the legislative branch.

Q He is immigrating branches.

Mr. Hoyer. Right.

Q Mexico won't let him come in.

Mr. Hoyer. He has to return to his own country before we will give him a visa. Go ahead. We will get off this.

Q So, on immigration, that didn't seem to be one of the things that you quickly mentioned of things you are eager to throw yourself into when the House reconvenes after the July recess; and House Republicans this morning went over to the Senate side and proclaimed it dead on arrival in the House. So I guess the form that the Senate bill is in now, what do you think its prospects are in the House, and when do you anticipate taking it up and running with it, as it were?

Mr. Hoyer. We are still waiting on the Senate. The Senate has a vote today. Have they done anything this morning?

Q No, noon. Around noon.

Q Ten minutes.

Hoyer

Mr. Hoyer. Ten minutes. So we are waiting to see what the Senate does.

Again, expressing my personal opinion, I think that -- I agree with the President on the proposition that comprehensive immigration reform is an important issue for us to address. I think that we have been saying that, again, since the beginning of the year. And it is -- it remains in that status. But, clearly, the premise was that the Senate, which reached agreement last year on a bill that I think had broad-based support, was going to move forward on such a bill. Obviously, our premise was incorrect. That was not as easy as we thought it was going to be. So we will have to see what they do not only at 12 o'clock but what they do thereafter in terms of considering the bill. If they consider the bill.

Q Is it fair to say that its prospects are shaky, because there are divisions within the Democratic caucus as well as among Republicans about this bill?

Mr. Hoyer. I think there are divisions within the country on this bill, but I think there is a broader based feeling among the American public that this question needs to be addressed. I think they have concerns about it.

I think there is an absolute consensus, as I said last week, the borders have to be secure. I don't think that is a difficult proposition. How you do that is subject to

debate and difference but not the fact that borders be secure.

I think it is somewhat ironic that the Republican party in California had apparently two of its officers who were immigrants and some who I am not sure they were illegal immigrants but who now have been removed because of the controversy.

The issue is one that we think needs to be addressed, and we are going to have to see how the Senate does, because that will have an effect on what we can do over here.

Q And I am sorry, on Cheney, are you guys really going to defund him, or is this going to go away before Thursday?

Mr. Hoyer. Are we really going to what?

Q Defund him.

Mr. Hoyer. Defund him?

Q Is Congress really going to, you know, pull --

Mr. Hoyer. I think there is going to be some consideration of his proposition that he is a member of one branch as opposed to the other. We shouldn't fund him in both branches then. I think there is going to be consideration of an amendment, and that will be discussed.

Q Will it be passed?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know about that.

Q When do you think that will be? Do you think that will be Wednesday, Thursday?

Hoyer

Mr. Hoyer. Probably Thursday. It will be, I think, probably on the Financial Services bill.

Q What are the drawbacks for doing that kind of -- or having that kind of discussion?

Mr. Hoyer. Off the top of my head, I can't think of any. The Vice President's made a proposition that is neither accurate nor credible.

Q It sounds like --

Q Other than that --

Mr. Hoyer. Other than that, you know --

Q It sound like the RSC is going to be taking issue with the number of earmarks that have been listed in the bills, and I am wondering how that affects the schedule for this week. Does it? And what are the guidelines or the limitations that I guess the House operates under? Because don't you guys have an open rule on these bills? What could we see or what are you anticipating?

Mr. Hoyer. I am glad you asked that question.

We intend to do the people's business. In an effort to do the people's business in an open and fair manner, giving reasonable time to consider alternative suggestions by Republicans as well as Democrats, we worked very hard 2 weeks ago to come to an agreement. That agreement essentially was based on the proposition that we would consider the bills from the Appropriations Committee

generally within the time frame. "Generally" is the key phrase there.

I asked that specifically that agreement be made. Mr. Boehner was not prepared to do that. So you heard articulated on the floor that we would generally work within those time frames.

As you know, last week, we didn't adhere to that, although we did complete the Energy and Water bill and the Legislative bill last week. The Interior bill was considered about 9 hours, a little short of 9 hours, last year under time constraints agreed to by Mr. Obey. So this is not asking for something that we didn't do when we were in the minority.

We intend to hopefully do that. We are hopeful that Mr. Boehner and the Republicans will follow through and meet that to which they agreed so that these bills can be considered in an orderly, open, transparent, effective fashion. Effective being that they get to a vote.

Q What happens if they don't? What happens if you hit 9 hours and there is still amendment, amendment, amendment? Are you going to take it back to the Rules Committee?

Mr. Hoyer. We are not going to hit 9 hours.

Q How do you -- as I understand it, there has been 188 amendments filed on this. How are you going to get through that many amendments in 9 hours?

Hoyer

Mr. Hoyer. There have been, I think, 256 filed.

Q Well, 188 by one person, yes.

Mr. Hoyer. One hundred and eighty-eight by Mr. Hensarling.

Q He went out and bought a case of Red Bull. He is a raring.

Q Two hundred and fifty-six are the total?

Mr. Hoyer. I have so many things I could respond. You just give me such great openings, and I am so proud of myself that I don't touch most of them.

Q But he is not a Dane.

Mr. Hoyer. But, having said that --

Q I tried.

Mr. Hoyer. -- I repeat what I said. We have been working to work with the Republican leadership to consider these bills in an orderly, open fashion, as we agreed to last year. This is not something that we did not do in the minority last year, and Mr. Obey giving consent agreements and limiting amendments and targeting amendments and limiting time so that the work of the American public could get done. I am still hopeful that that will be done.

We considered the -- you know, I am encouraged by the fact that we considered this rule, notwithstanding the fact it wasn't a controversial rule, but we considered it in 20 minutes with no recorded vote. It seems to me if there

Hoyer

were delaying tactics going on -- so I presume there are not delaying tactics going on -- but we don't have a consent agreement, so we will have to see. I am hopeful that the Republican leadership will honor the agreement that it entered into.

Q If there is 188 amendments and they are really going to act on that, is Mr. Boehner the person you should be negotiating with?

Mr. Hoyer. That is a good question.

Q In July, you mentioned college affordability, Approps, Energy. Is that it for July or is there anything --

Mr. Hoyer. Excuse me?

Q College affordability, Appropriations, and Energy. Is there anything else in July, or is that pretty much going to be it for the month?

Mr. Hoyer. There are five appropriations bills, which will take a substantial amount of time, because they are very large appropriations bills: the Labor Health bill, the Commerce State Science bill, the Ag appropriations bill, the Energy and Water. As you know, we didn't include the earmarks, that bill. I am leaving out -- DOD -- and one other. What am I forgetting?

Staff. Transportation.

Mr. Hoyer. Transportation HUD. So that in and of

itself will take, you know -- the first week in July we are off, not here, on the July 4th work period.

Q In your schedule called for with Representative Blunt, you said that that first week that the House is back would not be dedicated to appropriations.

Mr. Hoyer. Right.

Q So what do you plan to do that week?

Mr. Hoyer. We possibly could do energy bills. We could possibly do medical devices and prescription drug user fees. I mean, that is possible. I don't want to say that is what we are doing, but we are a little flexible on that, because we are going to start the appropriation bills the first full week we are back.

Staff. Last question.

Q What are the chances that the energy package will include a fuel economy increase?

Mr. Hoyer. I think the chances are good that we are going to do fuel economy increase. Now, if you mean the package -- and I don't want to anticipate what is going to be announced on Thursday. That is not my role, and so I won't do it. But I think the answer to your question is I think you are going to see an increase in fuel efficiency requirements by the end of this year.

Staff. Thank you.

Mr. Hoyer. Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 12:00 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]