

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

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Tuesday, July 17, 2007

11:49 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. We are going to consider H.R. 980, and I am not going to cut you short, the Public Safety Employee-Employer Cooperation Act, which is on suspension. By the way, George Miller and I have a press conference about that at 1:30.

We are then going to the energy and water appropriation bill. This is, as you recall under the unanimous consent with only the congressional initiatives being the subject of today's consideration, the energy and water bill. Balancing the bill has been done, as you know. This will be married to it and sent as a package to the Senate.

And then Wednesday and Thursday and perhaps tonight, depending upon how long the energy and water bill takes, perhaps tonight we will start on Labor/Health. I don't want to say we're going to do that because I don't know what the schedule will be, although I don't know whether we have an update on amendments. There were not -- as of when they requested amendments to be noted by 4:00 yesterday, there were only about 10 amendments, but we have not heard from the RSC, so your guess is as good as mine.

Then on Wednesday and Thursday, of course, we will do the Labor/Health appropriation bill.

I want to speak of two things briefly as we are now very close to this month completing the appropriation bills.

The Democrats have passed appropriation bills which are investing dollars in what we believe to be the priorities of the American people, to strengthen our country, both its national defense, to grow our economy, protect our families, and protect our environment and globe. You have heard the Speaker use that rhetoric. But if all it is is rhetoric, and you don't invest in accomplishing those objective, then you get no result other than rhetoric and cynicism by the public, properly so.

The President, unfortunately, has indicated that he is going to veto bills if they are above the number that he set forth in his budget. The numbers cumulatively of nondefense, non-homeland security spending is a very, very small, less than 1 percent, difference.

One hundred forty-seven Republicans have signed a letter, appropriation bill, sight unseen, and I mentioned this last week, that they will sustain the President's veto. This is not the rubber-stamp Congress, this is the Congress that under Article I of the Constitution has been given the authority, not the President, to apply resources to what we deem to be proper policy and proper priorities. We are doing that.

The President cut programs in the Labor/Health bill 7.6 billion below last year after inflation. So much of what the President complains about is that we do not want to cut

priorities of education and health care for the American people as he does. In real terms, after adjusting for inflation and population growth, the bill is 4.3 billion or 3 percent above last year's.

Now, as you recall, the President's -- under the President, when the Republicans were in charge, their budget expenditures grew by over 6 percent, about twice the number under the Clinton administration. The 1980 domestic programs amounted to 5.6 percent of GDP. Today's investments have declined to 2.9 percent, just a little more than half of that 5.6 percent. The President's budget would take it to 2.4 percent.

So while we surge in Iraq, we sound retreat in America, we sound retreat in New Orleans, we sound retreat in farm country, we sound retreat for children's health. Those are not the policies that this Congress was elected to pursue, and it is not the policy that we will pursue.

Secondly, on Iraq the NIE's conclusion that al Qaeda has reconstituted and is gaining in strength raises continuing serious questions about the success of the administration's policy in fighting terrorism. Mr. Chertoff and others have expressed concern that they believe that there may be additional plans to attack our country.

Americans have spent now over \$600 billion and moving towards \$1 trillion, and maybe more, 4-1/2 years in

Afghanistan, in Iraq, a substantial investment in homeland security, and the message we get 4-1/2, 5 years later is that al Qaeda is back. That is not a happy note. It is a troubling note, and certainly is not an indication of success.

We Democrats continue to be determined to fight and defeat terrorism, and to find and eliminate those who would cause us harm to our country as individuals, and to join with our allies, which are the civilized world that does not believe that the indiscriminate killing of people to make your point or because of their religious or because of their ethnicity or nationality is a policy that can be tolerated by a civilized world.

So we will continue to pursue our efforts to change our policies, but we will also continue to support the policies as we have in the 9/11 bill. We very much expect to pass the 9/11 conference report before we leave here in August.

Your turn.

Q Mr. Leader, it has been a few months since you passed your budget. Now you are getting around to implementing it.

Mr. Hoyer. Remind me to talk to you after this about something else.

Q Thank you. I feel special.

Mr. Hoyer. Everybody around this table is special.

And around the room as well.

Q To get back on track, it has been a couple of months since you passed your budget, and now you are turning to the farm bill, you are going to be turning to SCHIP, you have already done the student loan bill.

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q That bill as well as on the AMT, you have got all sorts of problems, either internal divisions or veto threats, and all sorts of obstacles towards meeting your goals, particularly, for example, your working on the farm bill right now, I assume.

Mr. Hoyer. Yes, yes.

Q How bleak does it look as far as getting your act together on all this implementing legislation, and what do you think you can ultimately get signed by the President?

Mr. Hoyer. Let me say first, from our perspective in the House, it doesn't look bleak. You have just referenced some of the things we've done and are doing and are going to do. We believe we're going to do all of those things. We passed a budget, we passed a CR, we passed our Six for '06, we passed the higher education that you referred to, we're going to pass energy as well, pass an energy bill before we leave here. We are passing appropriation bills.

Without any doubt we had a stumble or trip on the way to passing appropriation bills that we corrected, and we are

now moving forward on. The President said he is going to veto much of what we have done, said he was going to veto stem cell, and he did it. We think the American public judgment is that the stem cell research bill was one that they thought should have been signed.

We passed an Iraq bill that said we need to change direction and change our policy in Iraq. We think the American people overwhelmingly agree with us. The President didn't, and he vetoed it. We can't override his veto.

So I continue to be upbeat about the unity in our party, the focus of our policy, and, frankly, the support that we are receiving from Republicans. The higher education bill that we passed last week was excoriated by the Republican leadership, and 47 Republicans voted with us.

So we are not passing, for the most part, narrowly partisan bills; we are passing policies that we think have broad-based support. Now, I think the public is frustrated because we are not getting it through the Senate and getting it to the President and the President not signing them, so they are not becoming law. They don't care whether Democrats or Republicans are winning or losing, the President is winning or losing. What they care is their families are winning and that they are winning with whatever the particular issue is. As we said at the beginning, I feel their pain and frustration. I feel that frustration

myself.

But we are moving ahead. The farm bill you mentioned specifically, Colin Peterson, Chairman Peterson, has been working very, very hard on the farm bill. The Speaker and I both indicated to Mr. Peterson and to the committee that we want to see a farm bill that shows progress on reform while at the same time ensuring that our farm community has a safety net for bad times, drought, hurricane, tornadoes, market collapse, you have it. We just honored Dr. Borlaug, who has fed a billion people, extraordinary, because of his scientific discoveries.

The message is obviously we need farmers, we need them to be productive, and I think we are making some success of the farm bill.

Q Do you want issues or accomplishment to bring to the voters in a year and a half.

Mr. Hoyer. Of course we want accomplishments. Newt Gingrich -- I don't know whether I have mentioned this to you in this iteration of my career, I think I did when I was whip -- gave what I thought was an extraordinary speech in 1998 when we were considering the budget deal he had made with President Clinton, and I call it his perfectionist caucus speech. The perfectionist caucus speech was to his Republican hard-liners which are now in the RSC because they were so angry at the budget deal, and he said, look, and he

looked right at them -- some of you are shaking your head. He was right on the floor. I thought it was an extraordinary speech and did not endear him to his caucus; of course, he was not Speaker 6 months later. But he looked at his caucus and said, you know, it's very nice for us to do exactly what we want to do, but the fact of the matter is the American public has elected a lot of Democrats in this House, they've elected a lot of Democrats, not the Majority in the Senate. By the way, they've elected a lot of Republicans who are in the Majority who don't necessarily agree with us, and a President who's a Democrat who doesn't agree with us, and they expect us to move forward and act.

Now, we think -- one of the reasons I iterated again this week on the appropriation bills is we are talking about less than 1 percent of a difference in the budget between the President and ourselves. We are going to work that out. We have included some things that our caucus doesn't like in these bills. For instance, Mr. Obey has made it very clear that while we don't think that substantial dollars for abstinence, we think abstinence is good policy, we just think it's hard to spend dollars to get people to abstain from sexual relations, but it is a policy that we are not against, obviously. The President is very much for it, put money in it. We left that money in. We are prepared to work with the President. That was true in the foreign ops

bill, as you recall. We did some things, but not everything, that our caucus wanted to do. Mr. Obey has made substantial cuts in programs in the Labor/Health bill.

So this is a very long answer, I know, to your question, but the fact of the matter is we have done very substantive work over the last 6 months. The Senate Republicans have seemingly determined that no action is their route to reinstatement as the Majority. We want to pass a lobbying disclosure. They have a stranglehold -- they have lobbying disclosure by the throat. If they don't let go, we are not going to get lobbying disclosure.

They held up 9/11 for some period of time. They are now threatening, if we don't confirm a judge, to bring the Senate to a halt, even though it doesn't have a Majority in the committee.

You recall their argument when we were in charge: Well, look, it passed out of committee, so it ought to go to the floor. Now they may have taken that argument one more place. Even if it doesn't get out, it ought to automatically come to the floor anyway. My view is their strategy is just say no. I think the American public are going to get that picture pretty clearly.

I'm sorry that was such a long answer.

Q Mr. Hoyer, what is the state of play on the AMT bill?

Mr. Hoyer. We are working on it. I am very, as you know, I have said this a number of times, very enthusiastic about doing the AMT.

Q Are you enthusiastic about the draft that was floated earlier by Mr. Van Hollen and Mr. Neal?

Mr. Hoyer. Mr. Neal -- I guess Chris was involved in it, but essentially Richie Neal, Rahm Emanuel, Chairman Rangel and others have been involved. The answer is I am enthusiastic about that. That does not mean it will be the option, because, again, we have got a lot of players involved in this. But we are still talking about the pay force. Again, we've adopted pay-go, going back to the beginning of Rich's speech, which balanced the budget for 4 years in a row. We think pay-go is important, we are sticking to pay-go, but it makes it more difficult for us to get to where we want to. Some people on the Senate side want to do an AMT fix and not pay for it. We don't think that's good policy.

Q When are you going to get back to Iraq? Seems like there was a strategy of kind of going back repeatedly on Iraq votes, and looks like you are skipping it this week. What is the plan on Iraq?

Mr. Hoyer. I just talked about Iraq. It was one of the major pieces of my presentation. So we are not skipping Iraq. We think Iraq is critically important and one of the

most important things we are dealing with, but that does not mean -- we only have really 3 full days; we are not meeting Friday, which was planned. So I would imagine that it is possible that we would schedule legislation either as an amendment or as a free-standing bill next week on some particular facet.

I don't want to get into the particular facets. We passed a major piece of legislation last week, and we had a very unified Democratic Party in doing so, and we doubled the number of Republicans that we had. For those of you who don't know the numbers, we went from two to four. I know the spin is better than the figure, I understand. But in any event, we think that that amassed really a growing number of Republicans both in the House and the Senate. The Senators are more willing to talk about their concerns.

Q On that vote there has been a lot of talk from leadership about wanting the Republicans to cross the line and break ranks and vote in favor of that bill. There seem to be others in the future as well. That said, there has been very little effort on the part of Democratic leadership to reach over the aisle, some Republicans say no effort at all to reach across the aisle and try to come to some kind of deal that can move forward with Republican support. That seems to play into their contention that these votes are politically motivated.

Mr. Hoyer. This is the group that 147 people said we are going to veto it sight unseen. That group he wants to reach across the aisle to. Mr. Hunter and Mr. Skelton -- Mr. Skelton is one of the most bipartisan leaders in this House, period, one of the brightest, most able, defense-supporting, historically grounded in terms of our Armed Forces people in the House of Representatives, not a hard guy to work with. I think if Mr. Hunter wants to deal with Mr. Skelton on how we can change policy, but Mr. Hunter's position and Mr. Boehner's position have both been we shouldn't change policy -- when you get to we should change policy, we shouldn't change policy, there is really not much to discuss at that point in time. We don't have a partisan leader as the sponsor of that resolution. In fact, he is one of our more bipartisan Members.

Q Thank you, Mr. Leader. I write for Latin American media. My question is if there is any chance for those free trade agreements, especially with Latin American countries, to get to the floor before recess.

Mr. Hoyer. Before August?

Q Yes.

Mr. Hoyer. No. That does not mean, as the Speaker has said, they are not going to pass them. The Speaker said we are doing to do Peru and Panama in particular. My expectation is early in the fall.

You had your hand up. One question. I try to do this every once in a while to show all of you that I am really the boss, but you understand I will be chastised mightily when I leave. But I was so late that I feel badly. So you get the last question.

Q When are you going to do the energy bill before the recess, and what will be in it? Will the financial services package be in it?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to predict exactly what will be in it because that is being put together now. As you know, we did the -- June 28th or whatever that day was, we had the press conference with 8 or 9 or 10 of the committees represented there. It may be in two bills, maybe more, but probably two bills with the tax and the substance put together. I expect to do that before we leave. I don't want to predict a day.

Q So the tax bill will be before the recess.

Mr. Hoyer. My expectation is they will be passed together.

Q Thank you.

Mr. Hoyer. But they won't necessarily be in the same bill. Thank you.

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