

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, July 31, 2007

11:18 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning. We accelerated by 15 minutes. We apologize if we inconvenienced you, but we may have votes and I didn't want to cut short the time I had to spend with all of you.

Q New artwork?

Mr. Hoyer. The artwork, whether it will stay here permanently, but if you have read the designation, those are Maryland's signers of the Declaration of Independence. Those four pictures hang in the Senate Chambers. I was president of the Senate for four years when I was there. And larger versions of them hang in the Senate Chamber.

This is all I know; very interesting. They are Marylanders and I am really looking for something to put up there which has a more expansive American as opposed to Maryland folks.

Q Where are all the black people?

Mr. Hoyer. We were looking for an African American who signed the Declaration of Independence and our researchers are still on the job. In light of the fact that the signers of the Declaration of Independence were, like all of us, very imperfect people, their concept of equality was limited by their time. Luckily, we have moved beyond that. So that is the answer to your question. All right. I knew she was going to ask that question. I spent 5 hours last night

coming up with that.

We will consider a bill on lobbying reform, which we are on now. We are very excited about this bill. Again, it is not perfect but it is a very significant step forward and complements the ethics package that we adopted at the beginning of this session. Its consideration is later than we wanted. As you know, it has been held up going to conference, so we are now simply going to pass the same bill through both Houses.

The Ledbetter bill, Lilly Ledbetter's bill will be on the floor next, then Joe Courtney's Wild and Scenic River bill will be on, which failed on suspension. We think it will easily pass as a rule bill.

We will then go to the agriculture appropriation bill on Wednesday. We will complete the ag bill and we will then go to SCHIP, or we are not sure exactly the sequencing, but the SCHIP bill, which is one of our very important objectives for this Congress, is to expand the number of children. I will speak to that in a second.

Thursday and the balance of the week, we will meet at 10 on Thursday, 9 Friday and Saturday, if we need a Saturday session. We will consider the Department of Defense appropriation bill, the Tauscher Iraq bill, and the energy independence bill. Whatever conference reports are ready. WRDA may be possible, innovation agenda may be possible.

Higher education, although I doubt it. In addition to that, we will deal -- we hope to deal with the issue of the FISA court issue, the issue of the Foreign Intelligence Security Act dealing with the gathering of information, particularly from foreign communications.

We complete 8 months of very full accomplishment in the House of Representatives, and I would say to you, significant accomplishment between the House and Senate of bills that we have sent to the President. The New Direction Congress focused on getting things done for the American people. We continue to focus on that, and obviously this week is no exception.

Over the past 7 months, we have passed bills to make America safer, move the country towards energy independence, and ensure that all Americans have a fair shot at the American dream; our innovation agenda, our higher education bills. Making American safer, 9/11 bill signed tomorrow by the Speaker and the leader. We hope the President will sign this. The report of the Commission was that we had not fully done the work that they expected us to do. We believe that this bill moves us a very long way towards that objective.

The DOD authorization and appropriation bills focus on restoring military readiness. We are very concerned that our military readiness is at a point where there should be

cause for real concern about the ability of the United States to respond to challenges outside of Iraq.

With respect to Iraq itself, this Congress for the first time has stood up and questioned the policy being pursued by the administration, and it has not been a rubber-stamp Congress, has not been a see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil Congress. It is a Congress which is focused on changing direction in Iraq. We will continue to do that this week and we will continue to do it in September.

Moving towards energy independence is a very high priority for us. The energy bill this week will move us toward that end, as did the energy bill that we passed in the Six for '06. The energy and water interior appropriations, billions of dollars invested in renewable fuels and advanced technology and trying to wean us off foreign reliance on energy and lead us towards greater independence and reliance on the Midwest and our agriculture and cellulosic and wind and solar and all that as opposed to oil from foreign sources which are not reliable. I mentioned particularly Iran, but Iraq and Saudi Arabia and the very troubled part of the world, Venezuela, just to name four.

We have also moved on restoring the American dream, the minimum wage, we are very proud of that. Ten years and no

increase in the minimum wage. That took us longer than it should have, in my opinion, but nevertheless we finally got the minimum wage increased from \$5.15 to \$5.85 and 2 additional increments of \$0.70 a piece will bring it to \$7.25. That is still not where it ought to be but it is a significant step forward.

College affordability. We acted on that in our Six for '06 as well. Whether we get to the conference report on the higher education conference reconciliation bill, I am not sure, but we will certainly do that in September. But we have passed that through the House.

We have also made a commitment to and are restoring fiscal responsibility so our children and grandchildren do not pay our bills but that we pay for what we buy today. We think that is very, very important. We just received a letter from Secretary Paulson indicating that in the near future we will have to again raise the national debt. During the Clinton administration in 8 years, we raised the national debt not once in the last 4 years, not once. This will be the fifth or sixth increase, fifth increase in the national debt since George Bush took over from the Clinton administration, stating that we had a \$5.6 billion surplus. This will be the fifth increase in the national debt.

On SCHIP, that will come to the floor. It is a strong package that will cover eligible children, add 5 million

children and ensure that none of the 6 plus million children that are on the CHIP program now will be dropped off, as are the \$700 plus million supplemental inclusion the supplemental did for '07. It encourages seniors to take preventive health checkups, insured low income and rural seniors having improved access to Medicare, and to end overpayments through the Medicare Advantage program, which the medical community generally says is anywhere between 11 and 35 percent overpayments over competitors. We would hope that Republicans would join us in this effort.

Let's put up the other slide. I will get to this later.

I mentioned this to you last week. I want to reiterate it. This is President Bush's quote at the convention in 2004 when he was seeking the votes of the American people: America's children must also have a healthy start in life. In a new term, we will lead an aggressive effort to enroll millions of poor children who are eligible but not signed up for government health insurance programs.

This is a President who said he may veto the SCHIP bill if we pass it. That is inconsistent with his representation to the American people when he sought their votes and when they gave him their votes. We would hope that he would change his mind.

On energy, again, and let me close with this, as I

said, we believe this is a critical objective for the Congress and for the American people and for the administration both in terms of the environment, in terms of energy independence, and in terms of economic growth in our country. We believe that America can become the producer and vendor of energy efficient technology throughout the world. As we did in the 1990s with information technology, we can do the same with energy efficient and environmentally sensitive technology.

Right here at the Capitol, as you know, we have the greening at the Capital because we need to do here what we are asking people to do around the country. The bill supports energy efficiency, alternative and renewable fuels, energy research and green job training, as well as focusing on the Federal Government's responsibility as the largest user of energy to be one of its most efficient users of energy.

Let me close with the next slide. This is, again, bringing us up-to-date on what we have done. This is a Congress that has been a do-something, do-good Congress. Have we completed all that we wanted to? No. Frankly, the Republicans over the last week demonstrated their willingness and objective of slowing down and stopping the work product, not by voting against it, not by offering alternative policies, but simply by undermining action.

They have done that in the Senate and they have done it in the House. Those of you who were watching the Energy and Commerce Committee that try to proceed with a markup saw that the Republicans precluded that from effectively happening.

Those comparisons that you see behind you are pretty clear. They compare the do-nothing 109th Congress with the 110th Congress. The last two columns, and it is pretty stark, and even if you look at the two Congresses before that, none of them are close to the productivity and work product either in terms of the numbers of days we have worked, which all of the members of Congress are very enthusiastic about, I report to you, and if you believe that, you are slightly wrong on that. I hear from that daily. But my response is look, we need to put in the time to get the work of the American people done. That is what we have done. I think those comparisons show the product.

I told you last week what we were going to do, and we did it. I told you this week what we are going to do, and we are going to do it. The schedule is we are going to do the work. If that happens Friday, we will leave Friday, if it happens Saturday, we will leave Saturday, if it happens Sunday, we will leave Sunday.

Q Mr. Leader, they have been successful at retarding, obstructing. How do you circumvent that system, because it

appears that then you guys look like you can't govern because you can't get anything done, and Republicans are successful you say at keeping you from doing what you want to do. So what is the strategy? How do you get around that?

Mr. Hoyer. By passing legislation and working hard with Senator Reid to ultimately get bills through. The former chairman of the Rules Committee was on the floor complaining about the fact we didn't go to conference on the lobbying disclosure bill. I observed to him the reason we didn't go to conference was because Jim DeMint kept objecting to going to conference, even though McConnell wanted to go to conference, at least that is what he said.

I think, frankly, we have done a lot. Last week was a very productive week; two appropriations bills. The farm bill was a big bill that we passed. So I think we are moving ahead and doing a lot of work. Not only are we meeting a significant time, but we are also passing legislation.

Two out of the Six for '06 have now been signed into law. The stem cell was vetoed by the President. So we are batting 333. That would get us into the Hall of Fame if we did that consistently.

Q But congressional ratings are low for all Members of Congress.

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q Just not Democrats, not Republicans.

Mr. Hoyer. Actually, the numbers for Democrats are pretty good vis-a-vis Republicans. But the Congress is low. Why is the Congress is low? For the reason I observed last week, that the Republicans have prevented action or -- 70 percent of the American public is for the stem cell bill that we passed, and the President vetoed it. So we haven't gotten the work done. Speaker Pelosi and I both have observed the American public are upset with the Congress's production, and we are upset with the Congress's production. We share their view, we share their angst, we share their frustration, we share their anger that we have not finished productive as the House work would have provided. But I think that last week was a very productive week, this week is a productive week.

We are going to pass all 12 appropriations bills by the time we leave for the August recess. It is 30 days later than I wanted to do that. I wanted to do it by the end of June but we had obstructionist tactics.

Q Let me try this a different way. There doesn't seem to be as much consensus building, the reaching across the aisle to try to bring bipartisanship. I mean, it is either Democrats or Republicans. The old days, and I was here for those, and I remember you being around too, people actually

built bridges and built consensus. You don't have that now. So how do you get around that?

Mr. Hoyer. It takes two to tango. You cannot build consensus if others are not interested in consensus. A perfect example of that was in the Senate. And there have been some examples of that here last week on the energy bill. There was no effort to offer -- on the motions to recommit there were no efforts to offer substantive alternatives, meaningful amendments. There are efforts to kill legislation by their motions to recommit promptly as opposed to forthwith. If they had a real amendment they wanted to pass to make the legislation better, as you know, unlike Tom DeLay, I have advised members if they believe a motion to recommit is substantively something they want to support, and it is forthwith, then we have done that.

If you look at the numbers on the majority of legislation that is passed through the House of Representatives you will find significant numbers of Republicans voting for each one of our bills. What is the one that was 150? 9/11. 9/11 passed in a very relatively narrow, I think there were less than 30 votes for it when it passed the House. There were over 150, or 150 Republicans voted for it this time. It is hard to say when you go from 36 Republicans voting for something to 150 Republicans, which is to say 75 percent of the Republican Members of the

House of Representatives voted for that legislation, that we are acting in a partisan, divisive, non-cooperative fashion. Now 124 votes for the college education bill, an average of 62 votes on the Six for '06. 57 Republican votes for the CR that passed early in the session to fund the government that they had not done.

So I don't accept the premise that we have not fashioned legislation which has gotten pretty good Republican support on a regular basis. Iraq is not, the budget didn't. They are very partisan documents. The budget is always a partisan document.

Q FISA, how likely is it the House will take up FISA and where are you in negotiations with the Republicans?

Mr. Hoyer. I am very hopeful. I have had discussions with Republicans at high levels. I am very hopeful that we will address short term challenges to the intelligence community in ensuring our ability to intercept communications from one foreign source to another foreign source. We think that is very important, while at the same time, protecting the rights of Americans under the Constitution.

Q How will you do that?

Mr. Hoyer. We are working at it. I think we are going to have some progress and I am hopeful that we will pass something before we leave here.

Q Mr. Leader, for the ethics process to work in this ping-pong, the Senate is going to have to pass what you passed without any amendments whatsoever. How are they going to do that and can they do that before the end of this recess?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think they are going to do it by getting 10 Republicans to join with them in getting that bill up and voting for it. I think we are going to have a very -- Mr. Dreier indicated he was going to support this bill. I think we are going to have an overwhelming vote, bipartisan vote on this ethics package. I think it is going to send a message to the Senate. And the Senate passed their ethics bill 98 to 2, is that right? It was overwhelming. I don't want to state the figure because I can't remember.

I think that when you say how, by Harry Reid offering it to the floor and hopefully the Republicans will not want to be in a position of undermining a very significant step forward on ethics reform, which has been endorsed by Common Cause, by four or five other of the major reform organizations that have been working on this legislation.

Q Mr. Hoyer, are you concerned about having the votes to pass your SCHIP bill?

Mr. Hoyer. I am concerned about having the votes to pass all of our bills. But I think the answer to your

question is am I concerned; we are always concerned. But I think we are going to pass the children's health. Orrin Hatch had a great quote -- do I have that quote? I wanted to use the Bush quote. But Orrin Hatch essentially said that this saves billions of dollars by extending the number of children covered.

So we think this is a bipartisan effort. I showed you President Bush's quote at the convention. I wouldn't be surprised if there would be some Republican votes for this bill as well. But I think we are going to be in pretty good shape on our side.

There are all sorts of reasons to lose a few votes. We talked about action. I think we have been extraordinarily successful and extraordinarily unified as a party in passing our legislation. That is why we pass legislation. But, again, we have gotten significant Republican help on much of the legislation we passed.

Q The same antics that we saw in the Energy and Commerce Committee, do you anticipate similar antics on the floor?

Mr. Hoyer. I hope not.

Q What are you hearing?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, this week has been -- we have been moving along. So I am heartened by that. Saturday and Sunday are available to us to put up with the antics. I

have a vigorous no vote, who represents at least 95 percent of the caucus on the Democratic side.

Q If you get the SCHIP bill passed, what happens in terms of the President's veto threat?

Mr. Hoyer. It still has got to pass the Senate and we have got to have a conference and move it to the President. But, again, we think this is a bill overwhelmingly supported by the American people. The richest Nation on the face of the earth should not have children who cannot access health care because they don't have insurance and they can't afford the cost. That is neither a moral posture for our country to be in, nor is it from a fiscal, economic well-being competitive position a situation that we ought to be in. So it is both a moral and practical issue.

Q Mr. Leader, do you think Alberto Gonzales should be impeached?

Mr. Hoyer. I think Alberto Gonzales has lost the confidence of the Congress and the American people. I think in that context that he ought to step down.

Q Do you think that we will see that impeachment --

Mr. Hoyer. Not this week.

Q How about when you get back, what is the likelihood of seeing something like that on the floor? Saturday or Sunday.

Mr. Hoyer. Sunday at 2:00.

Q Would you support Mr. Inslee's resolution?

Mr. Hoyer. I am not going to get into supporting or not supporting Mr. Inslee's or any other effort at this point in time. The Judiciary Committee is moving on some other front in terms of testimony, as you know, that has been withheld from the Congress, which I think should have properly been given to the Congress.

But certainly Mr. Inslee's resolution, I think, reflects a significant sentiment in the Congress and around the country that Mr. Gonzales has not been candid and truthful with the Congress of the United States and with the people of the United States. And when you have Bob Mueller, the director of the FBI and others in the administration categorically indicating that something happened which Mr. Gonzales said did not happen, particularly in dealing with Mr. Ashcroft back when he was sick, I think that that confidence level is low enough that Mr. Gonzales ought to seriously think about stepping down for the good of the country. I would think that the President might assist him in that determination.

Q How likely is it -- on the energy package it looks as if there is not going to be a CAFE vote on the House floor. You said you backed the Senate language Ms. Pelosi has as well.

Mr. Hoyer. No, no, no.

Q You said there would be a CAFE on the final bill. Why no vote? Is it just a matter of not having votes?

Mr. Hoyer. No, no, no. It is a question, and as I told you, we are going to send a CAFE provision and maybe some other provisions to the President when we send him the bill. At this point in time, the Speaker indicated, I have indicated that we are focused on the package that we announced on June 29th, I think it was the 29th of June that we announced at that point in time. Mr. Dingell has indicated he wants to deal with the global warming issues in September. That does not necessarily mean that we were or were not going to do that, but I think you are going to see the energy package that was announced is the energy package they will try to pass. There have been some modifications, as you probably know.

Q Mr. Leader, on the defense approps bill, will there be any Iraq withdrawal language attached? Have you all decided yet?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think that Mr. Murtha -- I don't know the answer to that question. I started to speculate, but I have not talked to Mr. Murtha, so I don't know specifically what he has in mind. I know he has discussed some language, as you know.

There will be, as I indicated earlier, a separate vote on the Tauscher-Skelton, which deals with time deployed and

time at home, which essentially mirrors Senator Webb's bill in the House. Thank you very much.

Q Is The FISA bill used to give telephone companies exemptions?

Mr. Hoyer. Let me answer that because I think it is an important question. My own belief and I think the committee's belief is that we need to make sure that the communications companies when they are acting at the request of our national security agencies do have the ability to do so without fear of future liability as opposed to I don't think we are going to act on liability questions in the past, although I think when we deal with the larger legislation, that might be possible.

Q If those companies don't try to -- don't make -- the question is did the companies in the past make reasonable efforts to protect the privacy of their customers?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to get into that issue at this point in time because the committee is going to spend substantial time on that. We want to protect the American people, period. We don't want to politicize this issue. It is a very serious issue which we need to carefully address, and we are working to do that. We are trying to do it in a bipartisan way.

Q Do you think the Republicans are trying to politicize this?

Mr. Hoyer. You can draw your own conclusion.

[Whereupon, at 11:47 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]