

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

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Tuesday, September 18, 2007

11:45 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Hello. Okay. Last week, obviously, we were here for a brief period of time, but when we were here, obviously, we had very important discussions with reference to Petraeus and Crocker's testimony before the House and the Senate. And then, on Thursday night, when we weren't here, President Bush was giving his stance on effectively staying the course; not changing course. He has suggested that we are going to stay that course and return to exactly where we were at the time of the election last year when the American public said they wanted to change course, when they wanted a new direction, going back to 130,000 troops.

The surge, by definition -- if you surge, the presumption is the surge will at some point in time withdraw. That's all they have suggested is going to happen. The President says stays the course, despite General Petraeus's testimony that he does not know if our sacrifices in Iraq are making the Nation safer. That is a pretty compelling observation. Ambassador Crocker conceded that the surge has not achieved its goal of leading to political progress.

I think many of you saw and perhaps some reported on the Pentagon's latest quarterly report saying that security is deteriorating in southern Iraq through the intra-Shi'ia violence; not Al Qaeda violence, intra-Shi'ia violence,

another factor making it unlikely that Iraq leaders will make headway in the fall on key political resolutions which obviously has not occurred. Three or four -- depending on how you count -- of the 18 objectives that the President set forth and the Congress included in its legislation, only four have been resolved, less than 25 percent. And even those not perfectly.

Bush's limited troop withdrawal is not an indication of a new strategy. He talked about it as if it is, and as if talking about it would make it so. In fact, we are pursuing the same strategy. And in fact, what many of us believe is the only thing that has happened is that both General Petraeus and the President have acknowledged what everybody knew to be the fact, that there are no troops available to sustain the level that we currently have in Iraq past late spring of this coming year. So this is simply a bow to reality; not a change in course.

We are going to continue to fight as Democrats to change course, to assure that we have the resources and the focus to defeat terrorism. We know that the reports have been that Al Qaeda has restrengthened itself, that the Taliban seems to have regenerated itself. We know that sanctuary with these efforts are in western Pakistan in the area between Afghanistan and Pakistan. We know that the reports of the NIE are that this is the case -- not a

Democratic report, not a Congressional report, but the National Intelligence Estimate report. So we're going to continue to try to effect a change in course.

Secondly, the College Cost Reduction Act we think is a very important bill that we passed, and we are going to send that to the President today. The largest investment in student financial aid in 60 years since the GI bill. We're keeping our promises to get things done. Obviously, we addressed this in the Six for '06. This is a more comprehensive bill than the initial one that we passed dealing only with interest rates. This deals with interest rates and deals with Pell Grants, as you know, and it deals with incentivizing public service by college students and encouraging people to go into teaching, which clearly is a high priority need for our country.

Lastly, let me discuss the Senate is going to vote today on cloture. I urge every Senator to support moving forward on this bill and support its passage. As all of you know, I made this a priority item for me and for the Democratic leadership when we started the Congress this year. We had a bump in the road in terms of pay-fors which we continue to deal with. We nevertheless passed that bill. I am very hopeful that the Senate will pass it as well.

I was disappointed in Senator McConnell's speech yesterday in which he questioned the constitutionality of

this. While there are scholars that differ on that issue, clearly this is an effort to expand and provide democracy for the half million people-plus that live in the District of Columbia. We are spending billions of dollars, billions of dollars a month to assure democracy in Baghdad, but we are debating extending democracy to the residents of the District of Columbia. That seems perverse and contradictory in my view. And obviously Congressman Davis, who is one of the principal sponsors, had much testimony in which some significant constitutional scholars opined that this was in fact Constitutional.

I observed that when the Constitution says that we have the right to extend to residents of the various States the voting rights in the Congress of the United States, clearly all the residents of the District of Columbia are successors to residents of the various States, i.e., Maryland and Virginia; Maryland, in particular, in light of the fact that Virginia took its part of the District of Columbia back.

Okay. Those are my thoughts.

Q Congressman, on D.C., after the President vetoes this bill, assuming it gets through the Senate, which it may not, but say it does and after the President vetoes it, what is your next step? What is the next step for Democrats?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, we are still for this. If he vetoes it, it would be my intention to bring it up to have a veto

override. I don't necessarily believe that the votes are there. I am going to hope they would be, but we will work towards that. I don't even want to assume right now that the President will veto the bill. I know what he said, but I am hopeful.

But given his articulated commitment to democracy, that he would see his way clear if the Senate passes this bill, as I sorely hope it does, as we reach agreement in conference, which I think we can, and then I think we hopefully will send this bill to the President. If he vetoes it, you asked what Democrats' position is going to be. The Democratic party position is going to be, we're for extending full voting rights to the Representative of the District of Columbia in the Congress of the United States. We think that is right, just, fair and consistent with our commitment to democracy. So we will continue to fight for that objective.

Q You said the Democrats are going to try to effect a change of course in Iraq. What are you going to do?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, we are going to do what we have been doing, and that is, try to offer, either in appropriation bills authorization bills or free-standing bills, alternatives which we can pass which will try to effect a change in direction in Iraq, redeployment in Iraq, a change of policy.

So we will try to effect that. There is no single agreed step at this point in time. There are a number of options that we have been discussing, as you know, but I don't have a specific alternative to say that we have resolved on. There may be more than one alternative we resolve. I want to say that Tanner-Abercrombie is one of those options. That is certainly not the only option and would not be a sole option.

Q One follow-up. Senator Levin in the Armed Services Committee said it is important to bring on as many Republicans possible. To soften the language in this bill. Is that important for the leaders of the House to bring on Republicans? You have not had a tremendous amount of success bringing on Republicans. Is that a priority?

Mr. Hoyer. It is a priority to change policy. And obviously bringing in Republicans to the extent that that can be helpful to accomplish that objective, I certainly think that is a positive step for us to be taking.

Q Mr. Hoyer, do you think that Republicans are itching for a train wreck over spending bills? And what can be done to avoid that as we get closer to the end of the fiscal year and October?

Mr. Hoyer. We are working very hard. As you know, the Senate has passed four. We passed all 12 before the August break. The Senate has passed four of its appropriation

bills. They are working on others. I talked to Mr. Obey this morning, and he is talking to the Senate trying to see what additional bills they can pass and then see if we can reach agreement between the House and the Senate on various bills and hopefully send those to the President. We may send them -- there are a number of different ways to send them. We may send them --

Q Do you anticipate a big omnibus package here?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to anticipate a big omnibus. We would like to avoid a big omnibus, but that is obviously an option, unfortunately, from my perspective and the Speaker's perspective. Obviously a CR is going to be necessary because we will not have completed the appropriations process. We have not had any bills signed yet. So a CR will be necessary.

I think, as we move along, we will see whether or not an omnibus is the only alternative left available to us at the end of this process. But I think we will be going to try to do a number of different alternatives before we get to that point. That decision has not been made nor do I want to make it at this point in time.

Q Mr. Hoyer, I talked to a number of Republican moderates and some Democrats involved in those bipartisan talks on Iraq, and they say they like what you said in the press about your desire for bipartisanship, but they have

yet to hear from you or any of the leadership, and they are feeling frustrated that that hasn't happened. What is going on with that?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I don't think -- first of all, I'm glad that they like what I say. That's a first step.

Mr. Tanner tried to have a meeting -- Mr. Tanner was one of the principal signatories on the letter that was sent to the speaker and to the leader. I indicated to Mr. Tanner, and he asked me, would I be willing to meet with the six signatories of that letter. I said I would. He tried to arrange a meeting prior to us leaving, and that didn't work out on Tuesday. That didn't work out for various reasons; i.e., some of them weren't here. Some of them had scheduling conflicts. As you know, we didn't have any votes on Tuesday because of the funeral. Some were at the funeral so it didn't work out.

I am hopeful that that will happen. However, I have not talked to Mr. Tanner today, so I don't know what success he has had setting up the meeting. It is Mr. Tanner's intent to set up a meeting, and I am looking for it.

Q On the college cost bill, the third of the Six for '06 agenda items to be signed into law, do you think it will be the last one? And are you surprised that it itself taken so long to get this far in the agenda?

Mr. Hoyer. I am disappointed, not surprised.

We obviously have a number of bills pending, the energy bill which incorporates part of our Six for '06. The stem cell bill vetoed. I am disappointed in that. The minimum wage, I am pleased. The 9/11, I'm pleased with the progress we made. The President has indicated he is going to sign this college bill. As you said, that is the third. Prescription drugs, we always knew that there was a difference between the President and ourselves on the prescription drug negotiation. We continue to believe, and we will continue to work for the negotiation authority in Labor-HHS to bring prices down for seniors.

So I'm disappointed but not surprised, I think would be the answer to your question.

Q Why is it taking so long?

Mr. Hoyer. Because the Senate Republicans have been making it very, very difficult to proceed with work in the United States Senate. Very simply, the minimum wage got 82 Republican votes here, clean. My view is if it had come to the floor as a clean bill, it would have passed the Senate. Just as it passed the House with significant Republican votes. Republicans weren't prepared to do that. They wanted to have a tax on there. The tax was added and then passed. We had differences, but ultimately we found a vehicle to include it in, and we signed. And we include, as you know, a tax provision in there so we ultimately reached

agreement for small business?

Q Mr. Leader, can I ask you about the CHAMP act? Do you have any concerns that some of your members may have put themselves in difficulty by voting for Medicare provider cuts, particularly since they're not going to be in the final bill?

Mr. Hoyer. You know, paying for bills is difficult. Mr. Greenspan had something to say about that in recent comments and in his book that he has just -- those in charge over the last 6 years have not wanted to pay for things, which as a result we have gone \$5.6 trillion in surplus to \$3 trillion in deficit. Mr. Greenspan was very critical of that. I share his criticism. As a matter of fact, I have said that.

On a regular basis, talked about the fiscal irresponsible both of the administration and of the Congressional leadership over the last 6 years.

I think that the bill that we passed, the CHAMP bill, was an excellent bill and it was paid for. And it was paid for in a way I think was responsible and appropriate. We believe strongly that -- - and, as you know, an awful lot of people believe strongly, including -- that bill was endorsed by the AMA, by AARP and by many, many groups that felt that it was an adjustment in an unfair payment being made to some as opposed to others. Some were paid at 110, 120,

130 percent of the reimbursement of some others.

Now, it also dealt with the doctors having a 10 percent cut in their reimbursement. The problem with that is, of course, doctors are going to drop out of Medicare. That doesn't help seniors, didn't help our country. It is not appropriate. We included that. We paid for it.

Rural hospitals are stretched. We paid for that, included them. Those who are the poorest -- not the poorest, not Medicaid, but poor members included in Medicare Advantage, we provide for them as well. The Senate has determined that they don't want to deal with those other matters. They want to deal with the children's health, which we want to deal with that. That is the thrust of that bill. They didn't want to deal with paying for it other than by a cigarette tax.

We are trying to work with the Senate to come up with a bill that we can put on the President's desk which deals with children's health. The Senate has indicated that they understand that the other matters have to be dealt with. I am referring specifically to the provider payments to doctors.

Now let me say this: the President, I will again quote to you -- I know you are probably tired of hearing this quote -- "America's children must also have a healthy start in life." He said this at the convention in a promise when

he was seeking reelection, and he was telling the American public what he was going to do. "In a new term," the President said, "we will lead an aggressive effort to enroll millions of poor children who are eligible but not signed up for the Government Health Insurance Program. We will not allow a lack of attention or of information to stand between those children and the health care they need."

We think this bill carries out that pledge and when it is put on his desk, which we are going to try to do -- it is difficult for us to do because the Senate and the House obviously are apart. I will tell you the House leadership has been discussing trying to come to agreement with the Senate to put a bill on the President's desk; in other words, a bill that could pass the House and pass the Senate Floor -- desk.

Q If I could, the Members who voted for these cuts in provider payments that are extremely unlikely to ever become law, did they put themselves in any jeopardy?

Mr. Hoyer. A, I'm not sure I accept your premise extremely unlikely to become law. As I understand, the Senate leadership does not necessarily disagree with our premise of the overpayments as I understand it. And that they are as I understand it also are possibly willing to use some of those resources to do what they know has to be done and that is the doctor fix.

Now have we put Members at risk? I think the answer is no. The Members voted for what I think was a fair proposal that did things that needed to happen. And AARP, AMA, and literally scores of additional groups, health care groups, senior groups, endorsed this legislation.

So our members voted for something that I think was supported by a broad section of the American public. Period. So I don't think when you do that that are the at risk. Will there be some controversy? Will some people say they did something they didn't want them to do? Yes, and my experience has been over 40 years that every time I vote, that happens. But I don't think -- the answer to your question specifically was, I don't think we put any Member at risk.

Q Mr. Majority Leader, on the CR, there have been various dates tossed around. Can you give us an idea of what the factors are that play into how long a CR would be?

Mr. Hoyer. The factors are how often do we want to visit the CR as opposed to permanently funding 2008? I think that is the factor. And you can pick a lot of things. You can do 1 week. I think that would be unrealistic. We're not going to solve this problem in 1 week. We could pick 3 weeks 4 weeks, and we could pick a time when we think that perhaps we can adjourn.

Q What is that predicated on? What is the length of

the CR and the time based on?

Mr. Hoyer. I think it is predicated on when we think we can get the job done. I don't want to say they -- I believe that there is no point in us revisiting a CR on a regular basis. I will tell you this. The Speaker and I are both deeply disappointed that we have to revert to a CR. We would have preferred not to have done that. But I think realistically it is going to be necessary to give us some additional time as I said, the Senate has not passed the 12 bills. It has passed four, but we haven't gotten to conference on any of those bills yet so it is clear that we are going to need a CR. We have no intention of shutting down the government.

Q Mr. Leader, have you given any thought yet as to whether the House would take Columbus Day week off since it appears that you are going to be in longer than earlier you anticipated?

Mr. Hoyer. We have scheduled Columbus Day week -- not Columbus Day, but we have scheduled that week to work, and I have no inclination to change that. The Senate decided to do that without discussing it with us. We have work to do, and we're going to be done it. We are hopeful to certainly get out -- we scheduled October 26th as the date to adjourn. I would be unrealistic if I told you that I thought October 26th was a hard date at best.

Thank you.

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