PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

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Tuesday, October 30, 2007

11:35 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning. Start with the floor schedule. Today we are doing the Small Business Contracting Act, the rule for which we are now voting on, and we will consider several bills under suspension including the Senate-passed Internet Tax Moratorium Act, which has 7 years as opposed to the 4 years passed in the House. My belief is we will pass that handily.

We will meet at 10:00 tomorrow for legislative business, and the trade assistance adjustment under a rule will be the order of business for tomorrow.

On Thursday, we will have the hardrock mining bill under rule as well. There may be other items which we will have on the agenda as well, depending upon what happens with discussions that we are having at this point in time dealing with a number of issues.

The WRDA bill we sent down to the President, but we don't expect him to send that back until later this week, so we may not be able to consider that until next week; but we will consider it next week as soon as it comes up.

We are working very hard on the children's health insurance. We are committed to adding 4 million children to the Children's Health Insurance Program. We think it is critical for our country and for our children. We had discussion about that last week. As you recall, the vote

essentially indicated where we were. When we passed this the first time, it is my view that there are a very significant number of Republicans who want to support the children's health bill, but who are being, frankly, told by their leadership to hold tight and not to vote for it, but whom they expect to vote for it at some period of time.

We have had discussions. We believe we took into consideration substantial concerns raised by the President and by Members of Congress in the changes we put into the bill that we put on the floor last week. The Republicans offered an alternative which I think was very instructive on where the majority of the Republicans seem to be. First of all, we cover 3.9 million children; they cover 2.3 million children, or a reduction of 1.6 million children that were not covered in the Republican alternative. The number of lowest-income children covered through Medicaid, we have 1.9-, they have 600,000, 1-1/2 million young people not covered. Percentage of new enrollees that are enrolled in Medicaid, 29 percent shifted to Medicaid; they have 8 percent. Percentage of children switching to CHIP from private insurance, ours was 34 percent. CBO says under their bill -- they made a very big point of this -- under their bill it would be 39 percent.

Furthermore, the President's program, of course, of the tax credit, two-thirds of the dollars go to families that

already have health insurance. So while 34 percent CBO indicates would be displacement in ours, more than twice that would be under the President's going to people who already have insurance.

Obviously, the veto of the President was inconsistent with 81 percent of the American people's judgment that we ought to pass this bill. We are going to continue to work with Republicans who are interested and want to include children under the health insurance program. Senator Grassley and Senator Hatch continue to be very committed to this objective and very important allies of ours in this effort.

The President had a photo op with the Republican leadership. First of all, the President made some points about not getting our work done. We have done a lot of work in the House of Representatives. Republican obstructionism in the Senate and Republican obstructionism in the House and Republican obstructionism in the White House have been largely responsible for not doing some of the things that we wanted to do, whether it is change direction in Iraq, put more children under health insurance; and, of course, the President is threatening to veto appropriation bills, notwithstanding the fact that our appropriations bills are incrementally very small increases over what we are doing this year. The President wants to cut back on what we are

doing this year on educational matters and on other matters. We think that is bad policy, and we don't intend to do that, but we will move forward on trying to pursue our appropriations process and complete that this year.

The President indicated that we had wasted valuable time on investigations. This President wants the same complacent, complicit Congress that was a coconspirator and coverup on what was happening in this country. We don't intend to do that. We don't think that is what the American people voted for in November of last year. They wanted a Congress that represented them in oversight. Mr. Gonzales would still be Attorney General if the Democrats hasn't taken back the Congress, and we wouldn't know exactly what had happened.

Henry Waxman has been pursuing investigations and oversight, ferreting out fraud, waste, and abuse, and perhaps criminal behavior. Apparently the President is annoyed by that kind of oversight. We don't think that is a waste of time. We think that is our absolute constitutional responsibility.

We have not been able to send appropriation bills, he said worst record in 20 years. Let me remind you that on numerous years in the 6 years that the Republicans controlled everything in this town, they didn't complete the appropriations process until the following calendar year

beginning in the previous year of the appropriations process. How the President can possibly say that with a straight face; and then, of course, they didn't pass 8 of their appropriation bills out of the 11 at that point in time last year, and we had to pass them this year. So in the House of Representatives we have passed 20 appropriations bills, 8 in the CR and 12 individually. We want to continue, and we hope that we would receive some cooperation from the President, which unfortunately has not happened.

He also says that we are focused on paying for things, and he is right. The President wants to on almost every item of additional expenditures he has proposed, as a matter of fact without fail, wants to have our children and grandchildren pay for it, including $196.4 billion for Iraq and Afghanistan. He doesn't want anybody to pay for it now. He wants to pay for it later. He wants to continue to run up the credit card bill, which is why he has gone from $5.8 or -9 trillion in deficits to about $9.8 trillion in debt.

We are intending to move forward on some of the important pieces of legislation that we have still pending; FISA, children's health, ending discrimination in employment, and other legislation that we hope to see come out of conference, the energy bill, the farm bill, and others.

We hope, as I said, to put WRDA on the floor as soon as it gets back. That bill was overwhelmingly supported, focusing on water projects, research and development, environment, which communities need, and passed overwhelmingly.

Let me end with the fact that this has been, I think, a very productive session of the Congress of the United States, and I think any objective analysis and comparison will see that to be the case. The 9/11 Commission Report, which was our first priority, has passed and is now law. We have made America safer by that. Literally, millions of Americans have been advantaged by the passage of the minimum wage, which the Republicans let languish for 9, 10 years. We passed the largest expansion of college aid in 60 years to provide access to higher education for our people and make America more competitive. We passed an innovation agenda which came out of the Gathering Storm Report; lobbying and ethics reform, perceived by Republicans as far-reaching and significant, and all the while restoring fiscal responsibility by adhering to our PAYGO promise.

So, let me stop with that. Any questions you have?

Q When it comes to these threats of vetoes and what the President's saying today, appropriations, SCHIP, are you almost bound from this point to let this sort of play out in the court of public opinion and say, okay, we are over here,

and the President's over here? We might not have a government shutdown, but we are going to make these firm lines in the sand and let this play out in the few weeks in that regard?

Mr. Hoyer. We think what public policy is about giving to the American people a clear picture of what their options are. They voted for change; we are bringing change. Change is not the status quo. The President likes the status quo, and he is vetoing and standing in the way of change. He is standing in the way of investment and important objectives.

It is interesting that he wants the MILCON, the MILCON which is the veterans health care bill, sent down there alone. It is some $4 billion over what he asked for for veterans health, but he wants to pretend that he is very much in favor of it. He should have asked for it; he didn't.

The defense bill we think is an important bill. Other bills, obviously the Labor-Health bill, energy bill, the Commerce-State-Justice bill in terms of dealing with public safety; all of these priorities we think are important, and we will continue to make the case that what the President did was cut $16 billion from what we are doing this year. Not programmatically; what I mean by that, it wasn't cutting programs that got him $16 billion. He just said, we are doing going to do $16 billion less on health care,

education, public safety, border security than we did last year. We said that doesn't make sense, and we added to that $5 billion; $5 billion is what we have added to what we are doing this year, an extraordinarily small number, not to any of us individually, of course, but in the scheme of a $2.8 trillion budget.

So the answer to your question is, yes, we need to put forward before the American public what we believe to be the priorities and what the President believes to be the priorities, and they will have to make a judgment. They will have to make a judgment next year as to whether or not the priorities of this President, supported by many of his party, which he expects to do what he says -- that is essentially what he has told the Congress: Do what I say, and I will cooperate. If you don't do what I say -- and unfortunately we have too many Republicans who have said, Mr. President, whatever you tell us to do, we are going to do. That is not the role of the Congress of the United States.

Q Regarding the Internet national tax, what about the extension?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, you can argue it all sorts of ways. We think 4 to 7 made sense. We thought 4 made sense. That is what we have done, and we are going to extend it, and nobody has intentions to tax the Internet. Frankly, I would

not personally be opposed to a permanent extension, but what they have agreed to is a 7-year extension, both the Senate and the House. Well, the House has not yet agreed to that, but I think they will.

Can you stay? I will be right back; I will go up and vote very quickly and come right back.

[Pause.]

Mr. Hoyer. The Internet tax bill is on the floor. When I left the floor, I was in quickly, it was 390 to zero. So, as I said, I thought it would pass overwhelmingly.

Q Mr. Leader, when will you bring the Employee Nondiscrimination Act to the floor, and what has been the holdup?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, we are working on the way to bring it up in terms of satisfying all the interests here. I think it is clearly a majority vote for ending discrimination in employment in the workplace. I think there are some concerns. The Republicans continue to use the motion to recommit for political purposes, not substantive purposes. Substantive purposes would be trying to change policy. For the most part, what they do with their motions to recommit are not change policy, but try to construct difficult political votes for Members. We understand that. To some degree, we did that as well. So it is not surprising.

In the 4 years, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, we offered four

motions in 4 years, one a year essentially, to recommit and report back promptly. They have offered 22 in 10 months. This is a game. It is a relatively cynical game. That doesn't mean it is not an effective game and causes questions. So we are trying to deal with that so that we can, frankly -- if they don't like the legislation, they can vote against it. But what they are trying to do is not vote against the bill, but kill the bill by recommitting it promptly. Obviously, the response is, well, you can report it out. It will take about 2 weeks to do so when you get through all the time requirements. But then, of course, they will vote for another motion to recommit because you start the process over again. So we are working on that.

Q Do you think they will bring it this year?

Mr. Hoyer. The FISA bill and the SCHIP bill are similar instances where that has been the case.

Q Mr. Leader, can you give us some status on the development of Madam Speaker's --

Mr. Hoyer. Although, let me say on the SCHIP bill, they did offer a substantive forthwith amendment; it was not a promptly, and I read to you what they wanted to do. And they -- by the way, what I didn't say to you is they kept intact exactly the tax that is included for the revenues in our bill. They didn't change that at all. They simply spent less of the money on children.

Q Can you give us some status on the development of Madam Speaker's leadership energy bill? I understood it is more of a pure policy, taking out the taxes and the oil and gas provisions, leaving in just the RPS, the CAFE?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know where you get that understanding, but that is not my understanding. I don't think those decisions have been made. I think the energy bill, however, the conferees, our conferees, because the Republicans won't go to conference -- I am not sure why the Republicans won't go to conference except that it is a continuation of their obstructionism strategy, which is clearly a strategy on this side and on the other side to obstruct. And, of course, the President is part of that strategy, with one-third of the House or Senate trying to sustain that.

The energy bill is moving ahead. The bipartisan representatives of the committees are involved in the issues of their jurisdiction in discussions, and I am hopeful that we will have the ability to bring a report to the floor on the energy bill. I would like to do that before November, but certainly before the end of the year. Before November 16. I don't know if that will be possible.

Q Do you believe that Mr. Boehner's and Mr. Blunt's involvement in the SCHIP negotiations was constructive, is constructive, or are they in there to just blow up the deal?

Mr. Hoyer. I think it remains to be seen. But neither Mr. Boehner nor Mr. Blunt have told me they would vote for the SCHIP bill, the children's health insurance bill, if A, B, and C were done. In other words, I have no indication from them, in fact I have contrary indication to some degree, that they just simply don't think that the bill ought to pass.

Q What is your contrary indication?

Mr. Hoyer. That they might be working on it? Well, they both told me that they think that significant numbers of additional Republicans, well over the number needed to override a veto, might possibly vote for the bill. So that is a contrary indication. And that, frankly, as you heard me say, I think there are 25 or 30 Republicans above the 45 to have some desire under from what they perceive to be appropriate circumstances to vote for the bill. They want to be on record as supporting children's health insurance.

Q On the energy bill, might the finance tax package be bigger because the Senate passed a heftier tax package?

Mr. Hoyer. Again, I don't want to speculate on the funding levels because that has not been addressed. The questioner, I am sorry, I don't know your name or where you are from. I don't have indication that that has been resolved at all. As a matter of fact, I am sure it has not been resolved, and I think there have been some discussions

on that, so I don't want to comment on whether it is going to be smaller or larger. It is still under discussion. Obviously, there were differences between the House and the Senate.

Q A couple of weeks ago, your colleague Mr. Clay held hearings outlining the difficulty that the Census Bureau is having because the last CR didn't reflect increased funding for them to get to the next census. Do you have anything to share with us regarding negotiations?

Mr. Hoyer. I think this is a very serious issue. I will tell you that the amendments that were offered on the floor, which unfortunately passed, are undermining the Census Bureau's ability to get ready for the next decennial census, undermining its opportunity to test its equipment or to get equipment -- hand-held calculators oversimplifies what they are getting because I don't have exactly what they are getting -- but the technology to do it, as well as the modus operandi for doing it.

I am going to be working with Mr. Mollohan to see whether or not we can get in a document or in some bill that we passed in the coming weeks monies to the Census Bureau to allow them to get under way the census. Clearly, in this SCHIP fight, in the children's health fight, one of the issues is what are the numbers? How many children are there? Where do they live? What are their incomes? We

rely on the Census Bureau. We think about redistricting, but we rely on the Census Bureau, and the private sector relies on the correctness of the Census Bureau data in an extraordinary way, and to do it right is absolutely essential.

[Whereupon, at 12:02 p.m., the press conference concluded.]