

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,
STENY H. HOYER

Wednesday, November 14, 2007

11:05 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. We've been doing so much work. I want to talk to you today, and we have such great expectations for days to come. First of all, the schedule.

Q Are we going to be here Saturday? That's the real question.

Mr. Hoyer. The pressing questions asked to me by everybody. I saw a story -- somebody wrote a story about the lobbyists were worried Hoyer says their bills can't come to the floor after Friday. Such troubles people have.

Wednesday, Head Start conference today. We'll do the bridge fund. We'll appoint conferees to Defense authorization and we will do the Transportation Housing appropriation bill.

On Thursday, we will have mortgage reform, predatory lending out of Mr. Frank's committee. Defense authorization conference, we hope, will be done by that time, and the Labor-HHS veto override, FISA bill and CHIP, if we have a deal on CHIP. So we might be here through the end of business on Friday. I would be very surprised if we're here on Saturday.

Q The whole list --

Mr. Hoyer. All the Members want to be here on Saturday, but I told them the press wanted to get home. So I was going to pander to the press on that issue.

Now, let me say something, that last week was a historic, in many respects, week of accomplishment for the House of Representatives. I'm not sure that was reported. There's a lot of sort of weeping and gnashing of teeth about progress. We overrode a veto on the Water Resources Development Act by huge numbers in both the Senate and the House. We passed what somebody thought we wouldn't do, giving some 23 million, minimum, and millions of others tax relief, which was paid for and didn't add to the deficit, in the AMT. A lot of people thought we weren't going to pass that. We passed it, and we passed it with good numbers.

We passed, frankly, which was covered extensively by the New York Times but not the Washington Post, the most extensive civil rights bill since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 in ENDA.

We passed a housing bill. We're going to do another one this week which responds to the crisis in America on housing, and we passed a trade bill, all in one week, through the House of Representatives.

In anybody's fair estimation, that was a very significant workload accomplishment in one week for the House of Representatives. I don't think that's been covered adequately, and the American public I think should be very proud of the fact that that workload was done.

Now, appropriation bills, the President rejected

yesterday a bipartisan Labor-Health bill, and when I say bipartisan bill, it received 66 percent of the Members of the House voting on that bill when it passed the House and 60 percent in the Senate. That was significantly under the average of every appropriation bill, in my opinion, because the Senate was getting ready for the veto, and therefore, the Republicans who otherwise, in my opinion, would have voted for the bill did, as they have done so often over the last 6 years, rubber stamp at the administration's command.

Every other bill -- appropriation bill that's passed the Senate has gotten at least 80 percent support in the Senate. Actually, I guess that's not true because Commerce-State-Justice only got 79 percent. That's the lowest any other bill than the Labor-Health bill got in the United States Senate. So they were preparing, in my opinion, for their override strategy.

The President has vetoed a bill that is less spending on average than all of the bills he has signed on Labor-Health under Republicans. His fiscal road to Damascus occurred only after Democrats took over the Congress, purely political and partisan. There is no other way of explaining that this Labor-Health bill takes less of the national pie for health care and education for our citizens than did the previous bills passed by Republicans. In technical jargon, it is less of the GDP than Republican bills were.

Furthermore, it's \$5 billion under in real terms the average of Republican Labor-Health bills in the past.

So, on every statistic, this President, less on earmarks, less money, less earmarks -- on every criteria, this bill does less of what the President complained about than all the bills he signed when Republicans were in charge of the Congress.

We're going to put that bill on the floor later this week. Priorities of education, priorities of health care, community health centers. We have a piece of paper for you. We love these little pieces of paper. We hope you find them helpful. You obviously understand from our standpoint. You understand that. I understand that, but I think this will point out to you why we think this bill funds appropriate priorities, like the CHIP bill, priorities which the President committed to while he was campaigning and which he now rejects by vetoing this bill.

CHIP bill, I'll go into that. The CHIP bill, as you know, we've been working very, very hard on. We think children's health is critically important. The big issue for us, we're committed to 10 million children, \$35 million to pay for that. That is not subject to negotiation. We have been talking to Republicans. Many of you have been outside the room. We've spent many, many hours.

I told you last week, we've got the chairman of the

Energy Committee, Mr. Dingell, the senior Member of the House, participating in these, Grassley, Rockefeller, Hatch, Bachus obviously, myself. Very, I would suggest somewhat immodestly, high-level people sitting in a room trying to work this out for hours on hours, as late as 1:30 a.m. in the morning. We're still working on that. We're going to meet again today. We're hopeful that we'll get there.

Getting there means we pick up sufficient Republicans, and if the President disagrees with the agreement that we reached and we pass that and he vetoes it, that we can pass it notwithstanding the objections of the President.

We think this is a critically important objective; 81 percent of the American public supports the objective of adding more children of working families, not rich enough or not wealthy enough or not making enough money to afford insurance, but who are like other parents and not poor enough to qualify for Medicaid. We're working very, very hard on that, and we think there are sufficient votes if they are unlocked by the Republican leadership to pass this bill, notwithstanding the objections of the President. The key will be whether or not they will be set free to do what we think they believe they ought to do.

Lastly, on Iraq, we will obviously have a bridge fund bill on the floor today. That will give \$50 billion. It will set parameters, and it will say, Mr. President, we need

a change of policy. The American public voted a change of policy November 6th of last year. We believe the Iraqis, 5 and 1/2 years after the onset in March of 2003, actually it will be 6 and 1/2 years, need to take responsibility for their security and stability in their country; and we ought to extricate American men and women, Army, Marines in particular, from refereeing a civil war; that they need to come to reconciliation.

And while clearly there is less violence in some areas of Iraq, as I think I also mentioned, I would have been shocked if we sent 30,000 personnel, some 20,000-plus Armed Forces personnel to an area and we didn't find better security. They're the best trained, best equipped, highest morale troops probably in the world, and they've done their job. What has not happened is what the administration predicted would happen, an environment would be created where political reconciliation would occur.

So we're going to have that bill on the floor. It will set as a goal the withdrawal of our troops from the actual prosecution of this effort. They'll still be able to protect our embassy and protect our personnel and to go after terrorists.

We believe that we need much more focus on Afghanistan, which we have supported, which we've funded, which there's broad bipartisan support to confront the Taliban and

resurgence of the Taliban and al Qaeda on the Pakistan border and Afghanistan. We think that's where the real fight is.

We think Iraq is a civil war. Our generals think it's a civil war, in particular our retired generals. Sanchez, of course, said this was a catastrophically flawed policy. We want to change it. That's what this is.

Q How many votes do you think you'll have on that?

Mr. Hoyer. A winning one. Beyond that, I don't have numbers. The Whip is working on that. Obviously, we're counting. But I think, obviously, we think we're going to prevail, but what the vote will be --

Q Do you anticipate more Republican support this time around?

Mr. Hoyer. I hope so. I think there are more Republicans that have been voting for our legislation who think the policy needs to be changed. I continually am disappointed that, whether it's Iraq policy, whether it's appropriations bills that Republicans have overwhelmingly voted for when they passed this House, or on Iraq policy, that they feel constrained to simply support the President.

The American public doesn't agree with the President on his priorities, and that's been made very clear in every poll that I've read in so many of these different priorities. They don't agree with him on this issue. So I

would hope we get more Republicans.

Q On appropriations, you guys talked a lot about the difference in domestic spending being about probably --

Mr. Hoyer. \$21 billion, \$22 billion, add \$2 billion more, get to \$23?

Q So it's a good deal of it being baseline and little being extra --

Mr. Hoyer. \$5 billion of the baseline?

Q Does that mean you guys will distinguish then in coming to the end of the appropriations game between the negotiability, for lack of a better term, over and above the baseline versus the \$60 billion needed to maintain current services?

Mr. Hoyer. No. By the way, we're talking about nondefense discretionary when I refer to the \$23 billion. It's actually, as you said, closer to \$60 billion, which 80 percent was the President's request. He doesn't mind being over budget if it's defense-related. He minds being over budget if it's people-related, if it's related to children, if it's related to education, if it's related to the health care of Americans.

Let me say, though, I want to make this very clear to all of you. Mr. Obey, Speaker Pelosi, Leader Hoyer and others are fully prepared to sit down with the President to reach agreement, as Mr. Obey says, as he does, and we

understand that we'll have to give some. And we will probably have to give some beyond what I talked about, the \$5 billion over. We understand that.

Q You're willing to give above the baseline?

Mr. Hoyer. We're prepared to sit down and discuss. There are some areas where we think the President ought to give. There are some areas where we'll give, and hopefully, we'll come to agreement. That has always occurred in the appropriations process since I got on the Appropriations Committee some 24 years ago, and I think -- as I said last week, I think it's relatively easy to compromise on dollars. Philosophy is harder to compromise on. The President thinks we ought to be lower. We think we ought to invest in higher education. We think we ought to invest in community health centers. I'm not going to go through the litany, but those are our priorities.

We also understand this is the process and that the President has a veto, and if we can't override his veto, then we need to compromise, and we're prepared to do that.

Q On the war, Republican leadership says that violence is down, things are going better. If their Members haven't buckled yet, why would they do it in the next year if that trend continues? They've come this far.

Mr. Hoyer. The President projects another 10 years. We projected yesterday, correctly in my opinion, based upon

sound conservative economics at trillions of dollars of additional cost, trillions of dollars of additional costs above the \$600-plus billion that we've already spent when and if the President's request is approved. I would hope that Republicans would say to the American public, you didn't bargain for this when we told you this war was going to cost between \$50 and \$60 billion.

When Lindsey said \$200 billion, he was shown the door. Lindsey, of course, as all of you know, was the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers for this President. He said \$200 billion, had the temerity to say this was going to cost \$200 billion. He, of course, as of today, was 66 percent wrong, or said another way, 300 percent under. You can argue it any way it makes it look good, most terrific, I suppose, but the point is not that.

The point is that you asked me why Republicans should vote for this. Violence is down. I am happy that violence is down. What is not up is, this year, we've lost more people than any other year in this war. This year, more refugees were created than any other year in this war.

Now, we've had -- if I told you that the stock market was way up because of yesterday and you looked at your 401(k) and said, well, if the stock market was way up yesterday, why am I under what I was under last month? So we think that violence is temporarily down. I hope it stays

down. It will stay down if, in fact, the reconciliation and the resolve of Iraqis to keep it down and to enforce security and stability themselves is effected.

What General Casey said when he was there and what other generals have said, as long as the United States remains a large presence in Iraq, there will be a disincentive for the Iraqis to undertake the responsibility themselves. So I hope that the Republicans would work on that long-term policy, not short-term but on long-term.

Q You said you've been meeting with Chairman Dingell and Grassley --

Mr. Hoyer. Yes?

Q -- and Senator Hatch on SCHIP.

Mr. Hoyer. Yes?

Q And you're meeting again today?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes?

Q Do you expect there will be some kind of agreement within the next 24 hours or so?

Mr. Hoyer. Expectation might be overstated. I'm hopeful that that will occur. We, after all, are going to be leaving here on Thursday or Friday, which means tomorrow or the next day, for 2 weeks. We'll be back on the 4th of December.

Q But you want this on the floor before you leave this week?

Mr. Hoyer. I'd like to have it on the floor this week. It may or may not be possible, depending upon whether or not we get agreement. We have a bill. My expectation is, before the end of the week, we'll send it down to the President. If we don't have agreement, that doesn't mean we'll stop talking. It does mean that the President will have -- as you know, in this bill that we have currently ready to now send to the White House, we made adjustments based upon the criticisms that were made. Criticisms that were made was that it didn't cap; it included adults; wasn't definitive on nonlegal residents; and that we needed to focus on poor children. We did all of that, and so we changed the bill from the bill that the President originally vetoed, but we'd like to reach agreement; agreement being enough Republicans added to -- we had 45 Republicans voting with us. This is not narrow partisan bill. Forty-five Republicans voted with us, and if we can add 15 or 20 to that sum, we will override the President's veto if -- and if, and I would hope he would not -- he vetoes the bill.

Q Do you have the votes to pass a contempt citation resolution regarding Harriet Miers?

Mr. Hoyer. The Whip would be a better person to ask that question to, but my view is, when and if that comes to the floor, we'll have the votes for it. I would hope that would be the case, and let me say why. I would hope it'd be

a bipartisan vote. It's not my expectation.

Congress, as an institution, was set up by the Founding Fathers not only to make policy but to exercise oversight over the executive department. Why did they do that? They did that because they had a suspicion of and concern about the exercising of executive power because they had seen executive power abused by the king.

And from the Magna Carta on, there was the premise that there ought to be an oversight responsibility, and part of the Congress's duty is asking people to come and tell it what's happened in the executive department. And when the executive department just refuses to come, we can't find out the information. We can't exercise our responsibility.

And the Congress as an institution, not Republicans and Democrats, the Congress as an institution ought to stand up to protect the American public's right to have the information needed to make good policy and to exercise oversight.

Now, I don't delude myself that that will happen, but it is my opinion what ought to happen, and I certainly would hope that we would have significant Republican votes saying to the administration, because I think they believe this, saying to the administration, look, when we ask you to have somebody testify, you ought to come down here and testify.

Q Do you expect to have the vote before holidays on

that contempt citation?

Mr. Hoyer. You mean before Thanksgiving?

Q Yes.

Mr. Hoyer. No?

Q Where are you on the energy bill now?

Mr. Hoyer. There has been a lot of work done on the energy bill. Staff have been meeting. I think they've made great progress. Members have been discussing this as well. They're now -- I think most of the basic agreements that are to be reached by staff have been reached. I think Members, committee chairs, other Members are now engaged on reaching some of the other issues, and then I think, frankly, there are some of the very big issues with CAFE standards, obviously a huge issue, renewable petroleum standard, renewable fuels standard and pay-fors. They're going to need to be resolved by committee chairmen and leadership, and we're proceeding along that path. I'm hopeful that we will be able to have a conference report on the floor of both Houses in December?

Q When?

Mr. Hoyer. December?

Q Has the House leadership made any progress in getting the documents from the administration on the legal basis for which the phone companies were told they should participate in the surveillance program on that?

Mr. Hoyer. Mariah is not in the room. I think the answer to that is, no, and if it's not "no," I will get back to you. But as far as I know, the answer is no. I have no reason to believe we've gotten information either from the Judiciary Committee or the Intelligence Committee, although I think there has been some discussion where the administration under very limited constrictions is pursuing the possibility of both the Intelligence Committee and Judiciary Committee of reviewing some documentation. We will check on that to make sure that I'm accurate when I say that.

I think, frankly, that occurred because I think, as you reported pretty accurately, I made a pretty strong point about the fact that I thought the administration is withholding information from the House of Representatives because we wouldn't agree to do what it wanted us to do as opposed to the Senate, which agreed to do what the administration requested on the immunity issue, was an untenable, indefensible and unacceptable way to withhold information from the Congress. Again, it is a question of the executive arbitrarily withholding information that we need to do our work.

Q Following up again on energy just for a moment, do you think you're most likely to split that into multiple measures and bring it to the floor, or do you think it's

more likely to be one larger package?

Mr. Hoyer. There's been discussion on both. I don't want to hypothesize or speculate on which it will be. In either event, it will be a unified policy, whether it's one bill, two bills. In other words, they will work together if there're two. If it's one bill, I think that's more a question -- that's not a question of substance. It's a question of process.

Q Mr. Hoyer, based on the Iraq bill today --

Mr. Hoyer. On the what?

Q On the Iraq bill today, there's been similar measures taken up over the course of this year. How do you feel about -- since Democrats have been in control of the Congress, obviously there's a difference with the President on fundamental philosophy, philosophical differences on the war in Iraq. On that, you haven't really changed the policy, changed the war.

Mr. Hoyer. We're frustrated by that. The American people are frustrated by that. The American people know that they don't agree with the President, Independents, Democrats, in particular. Republicans are divided on that issue. We live in a democracy. We live in a democracy that has elections held for Congress essentially every 2 years or portions of the Senate, but every 2 years, the American public gets to express its will and give direction to its

Representatives. It only gets that opportunity every 4 years with respect to the President. As a result, one-half of the coequal branches of government is operating on a mandate that they received in 2004. I think the American public in 2006 changed their mind. We believe that the President of the United States is ignoring that change of mind and direction of the American people and is out of sync with the American people. So what in a democracy occurs is you continue to try to proceed towards changing policy. Clearly, as everybody knows, we have not had two-thirds votes in each House to accomplish that objective, and therefore, the President's veto has obstructed the change of policy.

Republicans in the United States Senate have obstructed changing that policy, and very frankly, Republicans in the House of Representatives have obstructed changing that policy. The American public, some 12 months from now, will have an opportunity to make another judgment.

Q Is this the standard? I mean, that's a fundamental understanding of the government there --

Mr. Hoyer. If you write what I just said verbatim, I'm sure they will understand it.

Staff. Last question?

Mr. Hoyer. Do I think they understand it? I think the American people see their government as not effecting the

end they want, and therefore, they're frustrated and angry. I don't blame them. But we have been trying numerous times this year, through the authorizing process, the appropriations process and speaking to the American public, to accomplish that objective. And we're frustrated, but we're not giving up. We're not backing up, and we think that we are representing the American public's will, and we think we're representing good judgment in terms of turning responsibility over to the Iraqis and -- this is important -- and renewing and focusing our efforts on defeating terrorists as opposed to being mired in this civil war.

Okay. That was the last question, the boss said.
Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 11:30 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]