

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,
STENY H. HOYER

Wednesday, December 10, 2008

12:30 p.m.

Mr. Hoyer. As all of you know, we've introduced an auto assistance bill. The Rules Committee will be meeting at 12:45 to consider testimony on that, and after the testimony will be considering a rule.

We've insisted, of course, as you know from talking to Mr. Frank and the Speaker, that any taxpayer assistance become the copy of the vigorous oversight that's included in the bill. We're also making clear to the auto companies and others that they must have a concrete plan for longer term viability.

It's clear that all of the stakeholders are going to have to step up if the automobile industry is going to continue to be viable and regain not only its market share but its ability to pay its bills.

I think, as I said yesterday, there is a great deal of reluctance to directly assist the auto companies. On the other hand, since I have of our Members, and indeed of the country, is that since there is a belief that letting the auto companies either fail or go individually into bankruptcy would place extraordinary costs on the Federal Government, would place at great jeopardy the success of the automobiles' restructuring, and that the impact, both psychologically and actually on the economy would be very, very severe and substantial. And so that does not appear, I think, to most Members to be allowed to happen. And we

will see whether or not this legislation can be supported by the majority of our Members both in the House and in the Senate. I think that is the motivating force for most Members.

The second issue directly related to the economy, President-elect Obama has made it very clear that he wants to see a very substantial economic stimulus package passed. He wants to sign such a package in January. We want to pass such a package; Mr. Obey and others are working on such a package now. And after 8 years under the economic policies that have led us to arguably the worst economic performance of the economy, the greatest loss of jobs and the most difficulty confronting our people since the Great Depression, it is critically important that we adopt legislation which will assist in getting this economy moving.

We plan to do that very early next year, before President-elect Obama is sworn in, and hopefully have that available to him for signature when he is sworn in.

Yesterday we held an economic forum. We heard the message from a wide variety of people, including the former advisor to Senator McCain that the recession was very deep, deeper than any since the Great Depression, that some very substantial response was called for, and while there were differing views among the economists, there was a consensus that substantial and quick action was necessary to avert an even deeper fall into the recession.

Lastly, let me say that, as some of you know, my first

overseas code as majority leader was to Darfur. Today marks the 60th anniversary of the United Nations General Assembly's adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Declarations are fine, important, but they need to be motivating to have people adhere to the principles enunciated in those documents. In some parts of the world, the international community has failed to enforce the declaration; and one such egregious place is Darfur.

Today, I'm joined by ten of my colleagues who were on that trip, including Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the ranking member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and eight other colleagues of mine who went to Darfur with me. We're submitting to President-elect Obama a white paper with recommendations for how to end the conflict in Darfur. I think you have that now in front of you or will get it.

We believe the U.S. must show leadership. All of the national security team, I believe -- certainly Senator Clinton and certainly Senator Obama -- have expressed strong feelings on Darfur. And we thought it appropriate on this 10-year anniversary of the United Nations -- 60th anniversary of the declaration -- to issue this white paper on Darfur, which continues to be a very difficult part of our international community.

Let me stop with that. And I know you have probably some questions. I probably didn't answer all of them in that presentation.

Q Mr. Hoyer, I know a lot of people are going to ask about the auto bailout issue here. But with the stuff coming out of

Illinois, there've been a lot of questions raised about Mr. Jackson. What is this sort of -- I mean, have you heard anything in relation to Mr. Jackson or any communication with him, and just any general concerns about this type of issue in this cloud that's hanging over Illinois right now?

Mr. Hoyer. Certainly there are questions and concerns, and "disappointment" is too weak a word.

The answer to your question is, I have not talked to Mr. Jackson at all, so I don't make any comment on that.

Q Is he here today?

Mr. Hoyer. We haven't had a vote, so I don't know whether he is or not.

With respect to the allegations in Illinois, they're an extraordinary series; and if true, the strongest possible response is warranted.

Q Are you talking about the -- I'm sorry, can we clarify, though? Are you talking about Governor Blagojevich there?

There's also ABC's reporting that Jesse Jackson, Jr., was Candidate #5, who was offering about \$500,000 in contributions or some mix of money for the Senate appointment. So when you were referring to questions and concerns and disappointment, is that directly to Blagojevich?

Mr. Hoyer. It was directed to the allegations of the Governor, regarding the Governor. I don't know anything about the other allegations. You say that, and I'm sure that's true, but I

have not heard them nor -- I haven't seen them.

Q On the automaker bill, are we going to see that on the floor today?

Mr. Hoyer. That's possible. We're still discussing that with the Senate.

Q And the greenhouse emissions -- lawsuit provision in the bill, can you give us reasons why that will not be part of that?

Mr. Hoyer. You mean the suit?

Q Lawsuit, yes, sir.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, the White House made it very clear that they weren't in favor of that. Number two, the suits would have gone forward anyway because there are other plaintiffs in the case. And as Mr. Frank has observed, we believe the auto bill is very important.

I agree 100 percent with the Speaker that I think the administration requiring us to use 136 money, that is, the advanced technology manufacturing money, doesn't make sense. I think it's not the way to go. But on the other hand, if that's what they will sign -- we're dealing with this administration now; waiting 41 days, we may not have one or more of the automobile manufacturers and extraordinary loss of jobs. So the Speaker, I think rightfully, said, given the fact the suit is going to go forward anyway, there doesn't seem to be much of a concession. And given the fact that we're going to have the Presidency and expanded majorities in both the House and the Senate in 41 days,

that we can address that issue at that time.

Q Are you going to be revisiting this and possibly shrinking it or making changes?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, in terms of the -- I'm certainly sure we'll look at it.

You say, revisit it. That does not -- revisit implies that we're going to make changes. I'm not predicting that we're going to make changes.

What I am saying, though -- on the suit language there's also a question of whether or not we could affect that anyway. There have been Supreme Court cases which say you can't affect the rights of the litigant as a condition of the receipt of funds. So there were a lot of questions related to that?

Q Mr. Hoyer, I'm confused about something. The House Rules Committee --

Mr. Hoyer. Well, you have far less things you're confused about than I, if it's just "something."

Q The House Rules Committee has reported a same day rule, and as you mentioned, the Rules Committee is going to meet at 12:45, or is meeting now, to talk about a rule for the auto bill.

So are you saying that it's possible that you might not go any further than that today?

Mr. Hoyer. What I said was that we're still in discussions with the Senate. The Senate has indicated they're not going to vote on something until Friday, I understand. That's what

somebody told me; I didn't read that.

I've talked to Senator Reid within the last hour and there are still ongoing discussions with reference to scheduling. And those will continue.

Q So are you saying --

Mr. Hoyer. We're going to be prepared to go to the floor today.

Q Oh, you are?

Mr. Hoyer. We're going to be "prepared" is the operative word.

Q Okay.

Mr. Hoyer. And we may well go to the floor today, this afternoon.

Q And what would cause you to not go to the floor today?

Mr. Hoyer. A sense that success would be more likely to start in the Senate and the Senate found itself able to proceed.

Q What concessions is the UAW making in the auto bailout?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I don't have in front of me a list that they've already made. Obviously, there are a number of things that they've already done -- 2005 and 2007 -- and have made recently with reference, as you know, to the payment of people who have been laid off for a year. So they've already made some concessions.

Q Does anything govern this?

Mr. Hoyer. No, not that I know of. But our expectations are

that all -- and underline "all" -- of the stakeholders, as they proceed to come up with a plan by March 31st which will show the American taxpayer and the Congress as to how they intend to be viable entities for the long term, that all the stakeholders -- that means the companies, the unions, the dealers, the bondholders, the stockholders, creditors -- are all going to have to -- there may be other groups I've left out in that group of six -- are all going to have to step up to the plate if they have an interest in the companies' survival and success.

Q Having not had a chance to examine the bill fully yet, how much control, do you believe?

Mr. Hoyer. Like everybody else.

Q Like everybody else.

Do you believe that the Federal Government and the U.S. Government should take over these companies? In these companies should it include control over production, design, salaries?

And then, also, when will this control be relinquished? Will it be sunsetted?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, first of all, I don't think the bill anticipates what you imply. And I don't think anybody is talking about the Federal Government taking over the companies if what you mean is substituting Federal employees for auto manufacturers' managers. The bill doesn't contemplate that, it doesn't affect that end.

What it does do, it gives a loan and gives certain parameters

for that money to be protected and directed at making these companies viable. But it doesn't contemplate us managing the car company.

Q So is the idea that when a loan is paid back, then those parameters expire?

Mr. Hoyer. Certainly I think the answer to that question is "yes," when and if -- I mean, there are obviously Federal laws in terms of fuel efficiency standards, et cetera. But the plan is going to say how they're going to operate that will make them viable in the long term.

Most people believe that's going to require them to have automobiles people want to buy, the number of dealers that is most efficient, the financial structure business model that can be sustained by sales. And of course I think, in truth, sales are going to have to increase, which the manufacturers do not necessarily have sole control over, because part of the control of that is whether the economy comes back, people get money in their pockets and feel that they can invest in what, next to their house, is their most significant investment, an automobile.

Q Mr. Hoyer, can I ask about a separate issue?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q What do you think about Delegate Holmes-Norton's request that the House vote on D.C. voting rights on or about January 12th, Lincoln's Bicentennial?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think it is --

Q Will it happen?

Mr. Hoyer. I thought that was the question.

As you know, I am a very, very strong supporter of that. As you know, I fought very hard for that. We had a little rules problem that we had to overcome -- that we did overcome -- so it took us a little longer time.

But I think -- as I've said over and over again, I believe it is unconscionable and undemocratic that the people of the District of Columbia's Representative in the Congress of the United States does not have a full vote in the Congress of the United States. These are Americans; they are people who, frankly, but for the creation of the District of Columbia, would be Maryland citizens. And as a result, I'm hopeful that we will move that bill as quickly as possible.

And I feel hopeful that with the expanded Democratic majority in the United States Senate, they'll get the 60 votes. They only came three votes short. And I'm hopeful that they will be able to pass that and send it to the President.

Q Does February 12th sound doable?

Mr. Hoyer. If you're trying to lock me into a date of February 12th, you're going to fail because I'm not going to say February 12th. We've got a lot of things on our plate.

We've got to complete the appropriations bills for this year, we've got to address a stimulus package to get the economy moving again. They're the two major items on our agenda. And so I don't

want to say that we're locked into a February 12th date.

I think her point was well taken, that it would be a -- given it's Lincoln's Birthday, given the symbolism of passing that piece of legislation to ensure democracy is exercised by all the people of the District of Columbia and their represented votes in Congress, I think it's good symbolism and I think it was a good suggestion. Beyond that, I'm not going to guarantee that it's going to be by February 12th.

Q Regarding the stimulus, can I get a question on the stimulus?

Would you talk a little bit more about -- you know, it seems a little bit unusual to come in before a President is sworn in. How would that proceed?

And then would that be part of sort of on a 100-days agenda, and if so, what do you see being the top items on that agenda?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, in terms of our initial efforts, clearly the stimulus is going to be part of the initial effort. Clearly, completing the appropriations bills is going to be part of our initial effort.

Then the President-elect has made it very clear that his top priorities beyond the economy and stimulus -- of which tax cuts for middle-income Americans, working Americans is part -- won't necessarily be a part of the first bill, but may be part of a second bill.

There's health care. Now, whether I think that's going to be

done in 100 days, I think that's problematic. I think it's going to require work. But I certainly think we all feel it needs to be done, that we need to extend health care affordability and accessibility to all Americans. And that will be a priority item for this coming year.

In addition, energy efficiency continues to be a major priority for the Congress.

There are obviously a lot of other issues. Education, clearly, and other issues as well. But I don't have a 100-day, because we have a new President who is going to have his agenda. We're going to work closely with him, use the outlines of some of the things we're clearly going to do early on. I think we'll flesh out the balance of the agenda as we move through January.

Q Getting back to the auto bill real quick, if for some reason you don't move on the bill today, and the Senate doesn't appear to be ready to proceed, as you say, through tomorrow, would this be in limbo? What will happen if it doesn't happen today?

Mr. Hoyer. Clearly, I've indicated -- and I don't know whether you've seen our schedule -- that Members ought to be available for votes -- 10:00 tomorrow or 9:00 on Friday, 9:00 a.m. So I have contemplated all along that we're going to be here this week to accomplish this objective. I'm hopeful we will do that.

I don't want to speculate beyond that. But the answer to your question is, we're going to be available tomorrow and Friday at a minimum to get this done.

Q On the stimulus, the word seems to be "substantial." Do you have any kind of range, at least what a bottom line might be to make it substantial?

Mr. Hoyer. We started December a year ago. Speaker Pelosi convened a group of economic advisors a year ago to talk about the economic challenge that was confronting us.

At that point in time, nobody perceived it to be as great as it became; and we, as you know, adopted a stimulus package at that point in time which gave a rebate to 100-some-odd million people. We've continued to have those meetings.

The reason I give you that background is, as the problem has become greater, the response that has been suggested has been commensurately greater, as you would expect. So that now, where we were talking about -- in December we were talking \$50 billion; that's December of '07 -- obviously that became \$150 billion relatively quickly.

Now the numbers you hear mentioned are substantially higher, in the hundreds of billions of dollars. What we need to do -- you heard me quote -- I think, yesterday if you were at the stakeout -- Lyndon Johnson who said, "It's not difficult to do the right thing; it's difficult to know what the right thing is." I think that quote is particularly apropos here where nobody is exactly sure of what will turn this around. Most are convinced that we need to try, however, to turn this around and save us from having a deeper recession than we already have, which is the

deepest we've had since the Great Depression.

So I don't want to speculate on a specific number other than to say, it's going to be very large.

Q Mr. Hoyer, Mr. Towns -- your meeting here in 30 minutes -- is Mr. Towns likely to be in the meeting with you, meeting with the chairman?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think that will be on the agenda. And the reason for that, you understand, we're probably only going to do the exclusive committees. And as you understand, exclusive committees are important. If we're going to move, you've got to have Ways and Means, you've got to have Energy and Commerce.

Q Can you tell me what the split is going to be among the Democrats?

Mr. Hoyer. Not off the top of my head. It's going to be pretty close to the split between the Democrats and the Republicans in the House.

Q We've got to have those committees to do what?

Mr. Hoyer. To do the stimulus.

[Whereupon, at 1:09 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]