

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, January 30, 2007

11:02 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. We are meeting at 10:30 today. We are in for morning hour; 12:00 for legislative business. Unlimited 1-minutes. Six bills under suspension, none of which are controversial, I understand. We'll take three votes and finish around 3 p.m.

Tomorrow will not be as noncontroversial a day. Today in Rules, they are considering the rule on the continuing resolution. Tomorrow we will vote on the rule. It will be a closed rule, so that I'm sure they will have questions on that. And then we will consider the continuing resolution and finish the continuing resolution tomorrow.

That will be our schedule for the balance of the week, and as you know, the Democrats -- as the Republicans did last week -- will be going on our issues conference in Williamsburg for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

First of all, let me talk about the CR. The CR results from the failure of the Republicans to do their work, to do the work of the country, to do the work of the people, and to keep the government functioning in the way that it is planned to function. That is, through a process of adopting 12 -- 11 appropriation bills in a way that provides for full consideration by House, by the Senate, by a conference committee, and then consideration by the conference reports.

The Republicans essentially are ending as they began.

November 22nd, 1995, they shut down the government, as some of you won't recall because you were not here, but some of you will recall that the appropriations process came to a screeching halt and the government was shut down. Opened up briefly, shut down again. And in my view, the Republicans paid a price for that. That's one bookend.

The other bookend is December 2, 2006, and the Republicans walked away from nine of the appropriations bills having only passed the defense bill and the homeland security bill. All other appropriations for the year were left on the table. More appropriately, perhaps left on the floor in a mess -- I cleaned that up -- and now we have to clean it up.

And Mr. Obey and Mr. Byrd determined and announced that they were going to do that through the device of a CR, which was not short-term but dealt with the balance of the year. That objective obviously is to get the '07 work done so that we can get on to what we should be appropriately expected as the new leadership to deal with, the '08 bills.

So we deal with the failure of the Republican Party to do its job tomorrow. And we will do so in a way hopefully that will get us to where we need to be.

The Republicans will complain that there are no amendments. That is true. Essentially, Mr. Obey is dealing with this as a conference report. After all, all but one of these bills passed the House. The Senate considered some of

the bills as well. And as you know, conference reports are not subject to amendment. You would never get through the legislative process. There have, however, been changes.

A, there will be no earmarks in this bill; B, there will be language in the bill which says that if the agency or department perceives a report language to be an earmark, it can ignore it. So the intent is to have no earmarks.

Now that, as I said last week, does not mean that there are not some add-ons to the bill for a particular department, agency or object. There are add-ons, which have been all contained within the Republican House-passed budget caps. So any expenditures are within the fiscal limits set by the Republicans in the House of Representatives when they passed their budget. As you know, we didn't adopt the budget overall.

There will be \$3.6 billion above the fiscal year '06 for VA health care. It is our view that we cannot leave the veterans health care underfunded. And so we have accommodated that.

There will be additional billion-two, approximately, for defense health programs. Again, that's for active duty health care to get us to a point where we needed to be.

And there will be an additional 2.3 billion above the fiscal year '06 for education and health care programs, including Pell grant adjustment, which the President promised

to do in the 2000 election, which essentially has not been done.

Other than that, there are some other add-ons in the bill. They are the biggest. We have tried to deal effectively with the administration's request on things that it thought it had to have done in order for the government to operate effectively. The CR is not the way our business ought to be done.

Again, I stress, this was done because of the Republican failure to do that which it was asked to do by the American people, and that's have a succession, doing our work, getting a work product. We Democrats intend to, in the future, get that done.

Secondly, next week on Monday, I believe or Tuesday, the budget will come down -- Monday. The President will send down his budget. The President's talked about fiscal responsibility. He has not practiced it. The administration has not practiced it. The Republicans, over the last 6 years, have not practiced it. He is going to propose a budget. We hope that that will be real. We discussed that somewhat last week, comparing apples and oranges.

We doubt, frankly, that it will be, but we are ever hopeful. We will see his budget and hope there is no fuzzy math in it, no more leaving out major expected costs that we all know are coming. The war costs, the AMT costs and the

costs of his tax cuts which presumably he will project into 2012.

We also hope that he includes in his budget support for PAYGO. PAYGO was adopted in 1990, reiterated in 1997, both in a bipartisan way. And it was a policy responsible for getting us to surplus and starting to pay off, for the first time in some years, substantial net debt.

We will see what the President does on domestic programs as well. Whether he has deep cuts in programs that he said he supported.

Lastly on Iraq. As you know, Speaker Pelosi, Chairman Murtha, Chairman Skelton, Chairman Lantos, Chairman Reyes, Mr. Hobson -- I've left out one -- Chairwoman Lowey, were all in Iraq over the last 4 days and Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Speaker Pelosi has been speaking on that. Mr. Lantos was just on being interviewed on that. I gave a speech, as you know, as some of you know, at Brookings. We have made it very clear that we do not believe the President's proposal for increase in troops in Iraq at the levels he has proposed are going to have the effect that he says they will have. We are joined by military leaders, we believe we are joined by the Malaki government. We are joined by the Iraq Study Group. All of whom believe that this was not a policy that they would recommend, notwithstanding that the President is pursuing it.

We're going to have as you know, a resolution dealing with that. I also, in my speech, indicated there are a number of other ways we can deal with it -- I did not choose any. I want to make that clear, but obviously, the appropriations process, the supplemental process, the authorization process are all opportunities for us beyond a resolution, which we believe will be addressed in the Senate, starting this week, and next week, and possibly as early as the week of the 12th in House. We will have to see how the Senate proceeds. We have indicated we are going to go after the Senate.

We believe that Iraq is a critically important issue and we have been addressing it, the Senate has been addressing it and continue to work on it. We are very early in the session. Our committees are now, for the most part, organized and we expect to see a flow of work to the floor from committees in the near future.

Okay. Let me stop with that. All the way --

Q Just a quick question on the closed rule?

Mr. Hoyer. Was that seat reserved for you?

Q No, I'm just very quick.

On the closed rule for the CR, there are two ways of asking the same question. I mean, you all are batting a thousand on the closed rule thing at this point. One, is there any reason that you believe you are ever going to have

an open rule, given history and precedent? And, two, you all are going to get beat up by the Republicans tomorrow with another closed rule. Haven't you thought of the trouble for tomorrow by the way you brought up the Six for '06?

Mr. Hoyer. The Republicans left a mess on the floor. We need to get it cleaned up so we can proceed on '08 business. That is, after all what we were elected to do, to do the '08 business. The Republicans walked away from their responsibility. They are in no position to complain how it is being fixed.

We believe, frankly, that a large number of Republicans, led by Mike Castle, are going to think what was done in this bill is exactly what they wanted done. We are going to think Senator Specter thinks what is in this bill is exactly what he wanted done. This is essentially nine bills, eight of which have passed House. It is not an omnibus, it is a CR. But to open up that magnitude to amendments would be an unending process.

Mr. Lewis's staff has been very much involved in the vetting of everything that is in the bill. That is not to say that I am saying that Mr. Lewis is supportive of either the bill or everything that is in there. It is to say that we worked on it very hard over the last 3, 4, 5, 6 weeks to include the minority staff and the minority membership of the Appropriations Committee in this.

I understand there is going to be a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth by the Republicans as they bleat about the work that they did not do, that they had a responsibility to do and were unable to do.

Q Just for PR sake, are you planning to bring up a bill any time soon that will be under an open rule?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes, as a matter of fact, Barney Frank indicated he has four bills that are now in his flowchart, if you will, in the pipeline, that he is going to bring to the floor with an open rule.

Q How about the Iraq resolution?

Mr. Hoyer. Let me just finish. And then I will get to that. Those of you who have been covering Congress for some period of time know that January has usually been a month when we haven't been here very much. We get sworn in and we came back for the President's State of the Union. But didn't do much other than that, and the last week in January, still organizing committees, and in February, you get started and you have the President's budget. We have done a lot of business very early on. The problem is though that we haven't had the committees up and running, because we are a brand new leadership, brand new Congress.

So we have urged the committees to get things in the pipeline and when they start getting things to report out, we are going to see -- you are going to see rules that do meet

the representations that we made. Here, the CR is cleaning up last year's work. If they had done their work on time, there would be no CR. If they had done their work properly there would be no CR. They can get up and complain all they want, but this is totally the result of their failure to do what the American public expected them to do.

The Iraq resolution?

Q Can you anticipate the rule on that?

Mr. Hoyer. We haven't discussed that at this point in time. As you know, there are two or three major resolutions now being talked about in the Senate. Very frankly, I will tell you from my standpoint, personally I could support either the Biden or the Warner resolution or some combination of those, and you will find that there are a large number of members in the Senate and House that could do that. But we haven't decided that yet. The committees need to figure out on this side what they want to put together and we want to see what the Senate does.

Q So do you think you would have a separate resolution or would you take up -- would you initially be working on the same one?

Mr. Hoyer. I think it is possible -- possible -- don't say that Hoyer said that this is what we are going to do -- but we have to see what the Senate resolution looks like. It may be possible that the committees over here say that

resolution works for us. Or they may say we want to make some changes in it. But the fact of the matter that decision has not been made and we will have to discuss it when we see the resolution.

Q What do you make of the Iraq resolution that has been proposed by Mr. Boehner and the Republicans? And to follow up on that, what do you think generally of the idea of articulating some benchmarks for the President?

Mr. Hoyer. I think in the speech at Brookings, as I told you the other day in which I said the President ought to report back to us on how he believes progress is being made, I am not against the idea of benchmarks but that cannot be, I think the total expression of the Congress of the United States at this time. We are now 47 months into this war. And Secretary Gates said last month: We are not winning. That is Secretary Gates who said that.

Rumsfeld's gone, who was the author of the policy supported by the President. So while Mr. Boehner's suggestions I think have merit, they are only part of the issue. I think the Congress is, as Senator Warner has indicated, is going to want to express itself on whether or not we think this policy is something that can be successful.

Q Is it important to have timelines associated with any kind of benchmarks?

Mr. Hoyer. You know, Senator Levin has talked about 4

to 6 months in terms of redeployment. I talked about the same thing, a 6-month period of time. I am not for deadlines as you know, maybe historically. Whether it was Bosnia or Kosovo or other efforts in which we have been. But I certainly think, yes, time frames -- maybe that is a different way, time frames just open-ended, you know "we would like you to do this at some time in the future" does not seem to be at this point in time, 47 months into this conflict, this war, specific enough.

Q Can I ask in terms of --

Mr. Hoyer. One, two, and three.

Q In terms of Democrats divisions over kind of what to do next, do you feel like the confusion is more about whether appropriations or authorization is the savvier route to go or do you feel there is a genuine concern among Democrats about whether there is any way to get U.S. troops out safely?

Mr. Hoyer. First of all, I think while there are differences among Democrats, I frankly think the Democrats are pretty united, and frankly, I think the Congress has a pretty broad bipartisan perspective on whether or not, A, we are succeeding; B, the policies we have adopted are going to lead to success, and therefore whether the President has made the best selection of alternatives.

So I think we are pretty well unified. Furthermore, as I said on Friday, I think the Democrats are unified in terms

of where we ought to go from here. Transferring responsibility to the Iraqis, shifting our focus to training and logistics and other matters that are nonfrontline combat solutions, and to engaging the international community.

We think that all of those are policies that the -- we articulated in the June -- excuse me, July, September and October letter signed by Majority Leader Reid and now Speaker Pelosi and the other Democratic leaders on this side, Mr. Murtha and Mr. Skelton and on their side, Mr. Levin, and I guess Mr. Inouye -- no, might have been Mr. Byrd. I'm not sure who was chairman of the Appropriations Committee on that side, at that point. Inouye, perhaps.

But in any event I don't think we have made a secret that that is our position it continues to be our position. Are there differences flowing from that? Yes, there are some who want to go further in terms of appropriations or authorization action. I think we need to have results of hearings and deliberations in the committee. As you know, we have had extensive hearings that have started early, been ongoing and are on going now that we will draw conclusions from.

Q On minimum wage, have you worked out with the Senate on how you are going to proceed and would the House accept the tax package as part of the minimum wage?

Mr. Hoyer. I think it would be inaccurate to say we

have worked it out. The Senate is proceeding and the Senate will proceed as it needs to, as it can. The House view, of course, is that we would want to see a clean minimum wage bill passed out of the Senate, passed out of the conference and signed by the President.

We will have to see what the Senate does. As you know, they are going to be addressing that today and in the balance of the week. And we are hopeful that they move something and we will see when they move it and then we will see what action we will take. But I think there's -- you know, I think there's a broad spread agreement in the House and Senate Democratic Caucuses as to the raising the minimum wage and the best way to do that we will strategically see how that can be done. The Senate has different challenges than we do.

Q But that creates a whole new set of procedural problems between the House and the Senate. And you --

Mr. Hoyer. They are going to have some votes and we will have to see where they end up and then we will have to make a determination where we go from there. There are options.

Q How long do you think it will take to work this whole thing out?

Mr. Hoyer. I hope not long. But I don't want to predict how long it will take the Senate to get a bill to

conference. Okay?

Q So the Republicans are saying that they don't want a cost of living adjustment for Congress at all in the 2007? The Democrats are tying cost of living adjustment to whether or not the minimum wage passes. Would Democrats support just not having a cost of living adjustment?

Mr. Hoyer. The bill precludes cost of living adjustment through September 30th.

Q There is nothing in there about minimum wage or tying any sort of --

Mr. Hoyer. Minimum wage -- no there is nothing there about minimum wage. There is nothing about the minimum wage passing or this that and the other. There will be no cost of living adjustment in '07.

Q You mentioned FDA programs being a function in the CR and the lack of financial resources for that and do you plan to address that issue and how do you think it is going to be broached?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, Mr. Obey has tried to broach, as I indicated, it will be difficult, to address all of these issues as best we can. I don't know specifically the FDA number.

Q Are you looking for additional approps for FDA? Is that a possibility? They are calling for --

Mr. Hoyer. Well, first thing we want to do is pass the

CR. Mr. Obey and his staff and the Senate staff as well have been trying to address the issues raised by almost every agency. The CV at best, an imperfect document.

Again, I stress the CR is the result of the failure to deal with the appropriations process properly. That is pretty consistent. They didn't do it in '95 when they shut down the government, and we're determined not to shut down the government this time. February 15th the CR ends. We have to move ahead and get this done, which is why we're doing it on Wednesday so the Senate can have some time to work on it.

But we will have to look at -- I will tell you personally there are some things that are not in this bill that I feel should be in the bill. I don't know the FDA level of funding specifically and therefore what effect this CR will have on them specifically. But I think every agency is going to find themselves, in some respects, squeezed.

Q What is the discussion between Democratic leaders on how to address Iran now stepping into Iraq and their influence there?

Mr. Hoyer. There has not been a lot of discussion yet about Iran in the sense of the recent developments. But that will be part of, obviously, the consideration in the committees, and we will -- I am sure that was some of the discussion that Speaker Pelosi had when she was in the Middle

East with these other leaders. So I think that will be important. I had some brief discussions the other day with the CNO, Admiral Mullens, about the deployment of additional aircraft carrier task force. But I believe that the administration's made it clear that there are no plans at this point in time to take any action against Iran.

There is obviously a policy of responding to Iranians that may be in Iraq that are, in some way, assisting the insurgents, my own view that is perfect -- people come in whether they are Saudis, Jordanians, Syrians or whoever they might be, assisting insurgents that are going after our troops, they ought not to expect to do so with impunity.

Q One of the options you included in your Iraq speech last week was possibly asking for a new authorization?

Mr. Hoyer. No, I said it has been -- what I said -- yes, I said --

Q What are -- under what circumstances specifically do you think the President would need another authorization?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to go down that road now and I didn't go down it in my speech. It was taken in the reporting I think taken a step further than I took it. What I said was that is obviously one of the alternatives. What I was addressing is where can the Congress make an impact on the policy. And that was one of the alternatives which I think is available to us.

And then I gave the opinion, as you know, that we have gone from a context of a war against the terrorists theoretically, or the Saddam government actually, to what is now requiring really conflict resolution as opposed to war prosecution. And therefore, in that context, we may want to look at the authorization. But I don't want to go beyond that. But that is certainly an alternative available to us.

Q Last Tuesday I was told by -- several reporters were told by a member of the Armed Services Committee that in a meeting with the Joint Chiefs, they were saying another 8 to 12 years in Iraq. Do you have a response to that?

Mr. Hoyer. I haven't heard that. I think -- and therefore really don't want to comment on it. Could it take 8 to 12 years? I mean, if somebody said it could take 8 to 12 years, that's their view.

Again, what we have indicated is that we believe that we need to start the process now of shifting substantial responsibility to the Iraqis for their security and stability. For going after militias, for stopping the sectarian violence, for the Malaki government for amending the constitution, reaching out to the minority communities, sharing revenues, then the next step is, of course, we ought to be -- in fact, as you may -- a relatively clever line -- I said it so -- but we think there needs to be a "diplomatic surge," which we think that there has not been and needs to

be. And the Iraq Study Group indicated that as well.

But 8 to 12 years? There are obviously places where we have been for longer periods of time. We have been in Korea for over half a century. We have been in Kosovo for over a decade. So I'm not surprised that somebody would make that observation.

Q Going back to the gift that keeps on giving, the Select Committee on Global Warming?

Mr. Hoyer. To whom?

Q To us, of course. It's all about us.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, everybody is the same, at least.

Q When is there going to be a vote on the floor?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think that determination has been made. I think --

Q Has it been talked about? Did you guys talk about it this morning?

Mr. Hoyer. We didn't talk about it this morning. It didn't come up this morning. I mean there are a number of ways to do it, one of which is in the funding resolution where you decide what committees are going to be funded and what types of committee are going to be funded. So it could be done in that.

Q In the CR?

Mr. Hoyer. No, no, no. The funding resolution, which comes up in March.

Q And that's funding for all of the committees?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q So basically, if you voted against it because of the global warming, then you are voting against funding for your committee?

Mr. Hoyer. I think this is going to end up not being a contentious issue.

[Whereupon, at 11:32 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]