

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,
STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, March 10, 2009

11:34 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. We're going in at 12. We'll consider several bills under suspensions. We will have the last votes around 2 p.m. We'll also dispose of the Flake privileged resolution.

And I might say, because we're going to be in at 2 p.m., that some Members have said, well, gee whiz, we're not meeting very often on the floor and why are we here? And of course, the answer to that question is because committees are, in fact, meeting, as all of you know. I know you have covered some of them.

On Wednesday, the short term CR expires at midnight. That was the -- as a result of the failure in the Senate to pass the CR last week, we did a short term CR, as you know, that ends at midnight tomorrow. We're hopeful that the Senate is successful in passing the CR without amendment and that we will then be able to send that to the President.

I know Senator Reid is hopeful of that as well, and so far they've been successful in that. I don't know whether anything's happened in the last few hours that I've been out of touch with the Senate.

In any event, we will also consider this week H.R. 1262. We will have no votes on Friday.

We are still also talking about and working on the D.C. voting rights bill. As you know, I feel very strongly about that, and I am working -- what an awful word -- assiduously hard to make sure that happens, and we're talking to all the interested

parties.

Next week, we will have, possibly dealing with -- possibly we'll deal with stem cells. We'll possibly deal with national service. We'll possibly deal with the lands bill that's been pending for some time as well.

The listening session that some of you just referred to focused on the extraordinarily deep recession that the Obama administration inherited from the Bush administration. Probably no President other than Franklin Roosevelt has been left with a more dire economic condition of the country than has President Obama been left by the Bush administration.

As you also know, we met with Tim Geithner, Secretary Geithner, last night regarding their program. They have a four-point plan, as you know, to stabilize the economy dealing with housing, dealing with credit, stabilizing markets and dealing with toxic assets. Essentially the economists spoke today, including Zandi, who has become our favorite economist, as I'm sure you've heard over and over and over again, mainly because he was an adviser to McCain.

So we believe he has some bipartisan credibility, and he's not advising us as a Democrat or as a Republican, but advising us as to his perception of what is happening and where we're going.

Unfortunately, in so many ways, the Republican leadership on both sides of the Capitol continues to be the party of no, the party of not trying to come up with constructive ways in which to

extricate us from the condition the economy was placed in by the policies that were pursued for the last 8 years.

According to a recent Newsweek poll, the GOP is viewed by a majority of Americans as the party of no, without a plan of its own to fix the economy. That's March 6th, '09, Newsweek poll. We've handed out, by the way, another one of our helpful informational bulletins on that issue.

We will continue to work with the administration to try to lessen the adverse effects of this recession, which is deeper than any we've had since the Depression, as all of you know.

The major work that we'll be doing over the next 3 weeks is the budget. We hope to have the budget on the floor, as which I told you, the week of the 30th. 30th is a Monday. So the first, second, or third to pass that through the House.

The President's budget, we believe, is a very honest budget. It is a bold budget. It addresses issues both short term and long term.

I understand the President today spoke about his education plan of expanding access to early education, improving teacher quality, encouraging growth in alternative charter schools, and to increase college access. He spoke of that, of course, in the State of the Union.

Also, in the last 2-weeks we've had a fiscal summit and a health summit. I think most of us, in the last 2 weeks, most of us found those meetings very useful. In fact, in the health care

summit in particular, I think that those of you who were either there or watched the coverage, there was a broad feeling among individuals, including Chip Kahn of course, who was the facilitator of Harion Reeves, that this was being done the correct way, that is to say, bring in all of the interested groups, discuss the options that were available and try to come to consensus on how to move forward, as opposed to constructing a plan and then presenting it and having it debated.

I think this is very much a bottom-up, including all the relevant interest groups, and I think he's dealing with undoubtedly one of the most important issues that confronts our country.

I talked about the budget. I think everybody at the conference, fiscal summit and the health care summit, agreed that if we're going to get a handle on the budget, if we're going to get a handle on our costs, we will do so by getting a handle on health care costs which are rising at two or three times inflation on an annual basis, and will, if left on that course, not be sustainable.

Let me just close by saying that there's a recent poll today in USA Today indicating 24 million Americans shifted in 2008 from lives that were thriving to ones that were struggling. That's an extraordinary number of Americans, and a much larger percentage of course are being affected. That reality reflects itself in the confidence of the American public and the numbers that believe

that we are going to be better off in the next generation than we are today. 71 percent thought that 10 years ago. One year ago, two-thirds thought that. That is now down to 59 percent. So we're obviously moving in the wrong direction.

As to the confidence of the people about the future mainly for their children. We hope to be able to turn that around. I think the President has articulated an agenda which seeks that objective, and we're hopeful that we can be successful in that effort. Your turn.

Q Mr. Leader, having said all that, how long a shelf life do you think this inheriting Mr. Bush's problems that President Obama will have and --

Mr. Hoyer. You talking about politically or actual?

Q Well, I mean the economy, and you've talked to economists. How long do you think before the American people will turn on this President and the Congress for not fixing some or many of the problems that are -- I mean, just how long a shelf life do you believe this has?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, the reason I asked you politically or actually, politically, shelf lives are very tenuous, as we all know. Actually, we find ourselves in position, frankly, of 8 years of taking a referee off the field, of encouraging people to incur debt. As I said, Cheney's observation was Reagan taught us that deficits don't matter. Everybody took that to heart. Government took it to heart. Business took it to heart. And

consumers took it to heart and went into debt far beyond their capacity to service that debt.

So many of us believe this is many years in the making. Obama has now been in office what, 40 days?

Q 51?

Mr. Hoyer. 51 days.

Q But who's counting.

Mr. Hoyer. You are. I recall, of course, the previous President blaming the Clinton administration years into the administration's tenure, whether it was about what was happening internationally or what was happening domestically.

Every economist that we've talked to indicates that the status of the economy when Obama took office was so distressed, far beyond any historical precedent other than the Depression, that to expect President Obama and his policies or the policies adopted by Congress to turn this around in a matter of months was unreasonable, that it was going to take a matter of years. They're hopeful that -- Bernanke indicated, who's certainly not an administration spinner, indicated that he is hopeful that if things work out, as he believes they can, given the Recovery and Reinvestment Act, that by the end of the year that there might be a turnaround. Other economists believe that we're going to be in 2010 before that happens.

So shelf life, I think we need to be very realistic with the American people. This is not going to turn around in the next few

months. We're hopefully cushioning the blow, which is what we did in the recovery and reinvestment, unemployment insurance, Medicaid expansion, nutrition assistance, you know, health care, food and sustenance, unemployment insurance, matters we've dealt with because we think it's going to be a longer term than we would like.

Q You said you're working on the D.C. voting issue. Can you describe what you're trying to do in terms of offering an alternative vote on the gun issue, just sort of describe what you're discussing with Members and when what the end game will be?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I won't get into too much detail because I'm having discussions, and I don't want to anticipate what the discussions will lead to but your question, I think, is accurate in that we're discussing options available to us, given the fact that we know that the Childers amendment enjoys majority support before the House of Representatives. Given that, we have to work within that context.

I also believe we have a majority of votes for giving D.C. the vote. We passed it 2 years ago. I think we will pass it this year. But we have to figure out how to get there, and that's what we're doing. And I'm discussing it with Members and with various -- and with officials who represent the District of Columbia, obviously Eleanor Holmes-Norton in particular, but more generally, D.C. officials, the mayor and the council, and I think we're making some progress.

I don't want to get on specifics, but I think we're making some progress on creating consensus on how we get this done. And what I mean by that is simply I think everybody is focused that the most important objective is to finally, after 2 centuries of giving to the citizens of the District of Columbia, some 600,000 people, a representative who, like the representatives of their fellow citizens, can vote in the Congress of the United States fully.

Q Are you sensing any willingness from your Members to potentially allow, you know, take a back hit on an NRA score in exchange for boosting it back up later?

Mr. Hoyer. We're talking about that. I don't want to characterize whether I'm sensing or not sensing, but that's certainly one of the things we're discussing.

Q Mr. Leader, can you talk a little bit about the meeting last night with Mr. Geithner. Did he give you any specific -- any details?

Mr. Hoyer. He didn't give us any information I think beyond what you have, and that is to say, talking about the points that they're doing, why they're doing it, what impact they think it will have. I don't think there's anything new that I have to add to what I think you already know.

Q Do you sense --

Mr. Hoyer. What I said about the four points and what he's moving on.

Q Do you sense overall in the tone of the Democrats toward nationalizing banks, towards not nationalizing banks? Is it still an open question in your mind?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, first of all, I think there are very few people on the Hill who like the term "nationalizing banks." That implies something that I don't think anybody on the Hill wants to do, and that is to take over the banks. Now, I think there are different definitions of what that is. If you have a majority interest, if you put enough capital in where you have a majority interest nationalize a bank, I don't think we want to characterize it as that. Nationalization applies to something nobody wants to do, and that is taking over the banking system. So I think that whatever we're going to do to try to stabilize certain banks so that we don't have a domino effect like we had in London, I think is certainly under consideration.

Q You said that you expect it to pass this year.

Mr. Hoyer. I do.

Q Do you think this will be in the next few weeks or are we talking about at a later time?

Mr. Hoyer. I am for sooner rather than later, but I am for moving as soon as I think we have the votes.

Q You think it's a question of weeks, you think --

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I hope it's sooner rather than later, but let me make a prediction here. We will pass the D.C. vote this year through the House of Representatives and a bill will go to

the President.

Q Do you support Senator Durbin --

Mr. Hoyer. I hate to make that prediction given the fact that whatever we do will have to go back to the United States Senate. Perhaps it's too big a step for me to make, but we will pass it through the House.

Q Do you prefer Senator Durbin's amendment to the final version of the D.C. voting bill that deals with media -- the FCC treating diversity in media ownership?

Mr. Hoyer. I would prefer that was not on the bill?

Q So do you expect it up on the House floor this week?

Mr. Hoyer. This week?

Q You raised it as a possibility before?

Mr. Hoyer. I did raise it as a possibility. It was a possibility. Good thing I didn't raise it as a probability, and I could say it was a possibility because I suppose it's a possibility but it's not likely it will come up this week because we're still working on it. And this is a tough issue for the District of Columbia. It is a tough issue for Eleanor Holmes-Norton. It's a tough issue for the House, and as a result it's taking time.

Q Do think you could do it if the amendment wasn't on the bill or do you think it would fare well in the House?

Mr. Hoyer. I think this bill is about giving to 600,000 Americans what every one of their fellow citizens has, and that

is, a voting member of the House of Representatives. I think it undermines our democracy to have our capital city not have a vote in the Congress of the United States. I think that's what we ought to be focusing on, not guns, not FCC, not anything else. That's what this bill is about. We ought to limit our consideration to that. I'm sorry that there have been extraneous issues put on this bill. But that is the reality, and we will have to deal with it. But you asked me would I prefer it wasn't on there, I would prefer it wasn't on there.

Q Do you think -- you said the Childers amendment had majority support?

Mr. Hoyer. It was voted on last -- in '07.

Q If Childers is put on the bill would it pass on the floor?

Mr. Hoyer. Actually it was -- I said '07. '08, we voted on it last year.

Q If the Childers amendment was put on the bill, would the bill pass?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know, to answer that question.

Q Isn't that what you said last week, if it was put on it would not pass?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, if I said it last week, did you not believe me when I said it last week and want me to say it again?

Q You weren't quite as specific. I'm asking what you indicated last week?

Mr. Hoyer. The legislative process is just like all of our families, you know you sometimes can't, sometimes can, and if you do this, something else happens. The fact is, as all of you know, the reality is we're confronted with this situation?

If we allow the Childers amendment in order on the rule, we could pass the rule. The Republicans will all vote for the rule. On the other hand, if it's in the bill, the Republicans are still going to vote against the bill. We've seen that the overwhelming majority are not for enfranchising Ms. Norton, at least by legislation. They argue they need a constitutional amendment.

On the other hand, if we put the Childers in there, there are a whole lot of people in our caucus who don't like Childers's [amendment], and if you don't get the Republicans to vote for it and we lose some of our Democrats, it may not be possible to pass the bill. That's the situation I think we are in, and this week I still think we're in that.

Q Is that part of what you lay out to gun right supporters in terms of asking for a separate vote, that they're not going to get it through on the D.C. vote?

Mr. Hoyer. Clearly, that's part of the discussion, yeah. I mean, the conundrum that we find ourselves in, we're discussing with people and people have to make a determination what realistically we can do because, after all, politics is the art of the possible. It's not my quote obviously. It's a quote through the centuries, but it is still true?

Q I know you want to pass health care reforms and energy and education and everything, but what part of the President's budget, Republicans aside, is going to be the most challenging you think to your caucus?

Mr. Hoyer. Would that we could put Republicans aside that would be such a good thing. That just don't sound right. I got you. I think both. I think if you're asking me -- you are asking me -- I think health care is probably the heavier lift but energy is also a heavy lift. Heavy lift in the sense there are a lot of interest groups. They're all concerned about how they're going to be affected by either health care reform or by energy, whether they're providers of energy or providers of health care, whether they're users. All of us are users of both. There are a lot of very weighty, tough questions involved in both those issues. I think education, frankly, is going to be dealt with. The President's now put it on the table. I think that will be -- energy and health care probably are the primary focuses right now.

Q Energy because of cap and trade?

Mr. Hoyer. Energy because of cap and trade. Cap and trade is a heavy lift.

Q Might that have to be put off?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, you know, because I'm honest with all of you and I think you think when somebody says might it be put off, I think the answer to that might be. We have no intention of doing that at this point in time, and our intention is, in fact,

to move it ahead. But again -- and I think we can -- I think we're going to deal with it, the carbon footprint, in one way or another. Obviously, cap and trade, my view is, is the leading option on the table. Yes.

Q Can I follow up on these big issues? You mentioned a lot of Members are grumbling that they're here but they there're no votes?

Mr. Hoyer. I do?

Q It seems that we're entering a period where a lot of the work is going to be done in committees on these big bills, any of which any year would be, you know, a singular accomplishment for the Congress.

Mr. Hoyer. I do?

Q Could you comment, is there going to be days, for instance, when the House will be in session but there won't be any floor votes? The work is going to transfer so much to the committees working on these big bills, regular order, in other words.

Mr. Hoyer. We will try to have votes every day we're here. We find it has a salutary effect on quorums.

Q How much leeway would the committee chairmen, how much leeway are they going to have in drafting these bills?

Mr. Hoyer. The Speaker and I have both said that we're for regular order. That means we're for committees considering these pieces of legislation in subcommittee and full committee and

having hearings, having input, having both parties have an opportunity to propose their ideas.

Now, having said that, the way we work obviously is the leadership is engaged with the committee chairs, the committee members as we work through these because -- and the reason the leadership is engaged is because it's very nice to consider something in committee but it's got to come to the floor. So the committee has to have an idea of what will happen to it on the floor, and the leadership has to have an idea that we can get something from the committee that we can have success with on the floor.

Did that sufficiently confuse you? I mean, it is the committee's -- we want the committees to consider the legislation, but we're not going to be disengaged in that because there's no point in having a committee with a product that we can't pass on the floor.

Q If cap and trade is such a difficult lift, why combine it with energy? Why don't you combine it with more consensus? Why have one vote as opposed to two?

Mr. Hoyer. I think the committee chairman believes -- I don't think he's correct on that personally, that passing a single bill will be easier than breaking it up into parts. And the reason for that is fairly obvious because that means there will be a lot of things in this you will like, and maybe some things you think aren't quite to your liking, and that's all always the case

when you're confronted with a bill. If you have a single item it's easier to focus on just that item. And when you have single item that, particularly as this does, relates to a lot of other items in terms of how you pay for other items and how they interrelate to one another, the chairman, I think, is very strongly of the view that one bill is the preferable option.

Now the Senate has been talking about two, but I understand there's some talk in the Senate about -- well, I won't speak for them. You could argue it both ways.

Q Once more on the D.C. vote, if I could, you mentioned there was a growing consensus. Does that involve perhaps splitting off the gun amendment and promising a separate vote?

Mr. Hoyer. I think that's an option. In other words, I don't want to be pinned down, and so I'm not being pinned down on the option that we're pursuing because there is no the option right now. Is that an option? Yes, it is, and if that frankly got us there, I'd be for that option. I'm for the option that gets us there.

Q Can I ask one more question?

Mr. Hoyer. Go ahead.

Q This goes back to the omnibus spending you said?

Mr. Hoyer. On the omnibus?

Q On the omnibus right now could you just reiterate if say the Vitter amendment were to be attached or another amendment like that, the House leadership would reject it and go to a CR?

Mr. Hoyer. I think there is a -- there's certainly a sense that CR, if the Senate can't pass the bill that was agreed upon -- again, I don't have the McConnell quote in front of me, but you remember me giving the McConnell quote where he said, look, this has been vetted, both sides agree we can pass this. That's what we thought when we sent them the bill that had been vetted and the four corners had been agreed to by Republicans and Democrats in the House and Senate. And that didn't happen, and therefore, one option that is certainly on the table is to pass a CR, you know, a clean CR.

Q Do you think the timing will give you time to look at it?

Mr. Hoyer. Excuse me, the timing?

Q Yes, the timing. It's due today, correct?

Mr. Hoyer. Mr. Miller and Mr. Harkin have either had a press conference or are going to have a press conference to introduce it, and so they're going to do that today.

Now, in terms of the timing, I think Mr. Miller and I both said, and others have said, there's an expectation the Senate would move the bill first. We after all have already passed the bill in the last Congress, and so I think there's a sense that we want to see what the Senate can do. And so it's our expectation to move first, but I can't give you specifics on timing. Although as I recall, I read this quote from Senator Reid that he said by the summer.

Q Is there any sense that on the D.C. vote bill, with what the NRA is doing by scoring the rule, is out of bounds in some way?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, you know, out of bounds, interest groups score votes that they think are important. In this case, they see this as a way to accomplish an objective. I disagree with them on using this vehicle. There are other vehicles for them. There's the D.C. appropriation bill. There are other bills dealing with the District of Columbia, but you know, they've determined that this is a strategy they think might work.

Q But usually they don't -- people don't score the rule?

Mr. Hoyer. It's unusual and I would prefer they didn't do it.

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