

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,  
STENY H. HOYER

\*\*\*

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

10:40 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. As you know, we are in today, we were in last night. We did the suspensions. We will meet at noon for legislative business. Several bills under suspension on Wednesday. We are going to do the global leadership AIDS bill, Tuberculosis and Malaria Reauthorization Act. Thursday we will meet at 10:00. We will commemorate the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King; there will be a ceremony at Statuary Hall. And we will consider the U.S. Fire Administration Reauthorization Act, and then Friday there are no votes.

The AIDS bill and other deadly diseases that are devastating to many in Africa and other countries will authorize \$50 billion for 5 years, as you know, and do something on which I think we have bipartisan agreement. And this has been an area where, frankly, the President has led in a way that those of us on our side of the aisle could enthusiastically support this issue. And, of course, the Speaker has been one of the leaders on this issue for over 20 years.

Legislation overturns the controversial, ineffective one-third abstinence, and only requirement, directing the administration to promote a balanced prevention program. And this may have some controversy to it.

As you know, the bill is named in honor of Tom Lantos and Henry Hyde, both of whom dedicated much of their life's focus to preserving the dignity of human life.

On the economy, clearly on the minds of every American, the administration's economic performance over the last 7 years has been an unmitigated disaster. We have handed you a paper in which we have put forward some of the things we believe that show that assertion to be accurate in terms of comparisons within what either the administration said was going to happen or, in fact, a comparison between what has happened in previous administrations, previous economies and today.

Yesterday we all read there are 28 million Americans who will receive food stamps this year, which is the highest number since the program began. That is according to The New York Times. In Ohio, over a million people, about 10 percent of the State's population, are given food stamps. One out of every six West Virginians receive food stamps. Average price of gas is now \$3.29, up from \$1.46 7 years ago when Bush took office. That is a 125 percent increase, a more than doubling. Additional 8.6 million people are uninsured. Adjusting for inflation, tuition for 4-year colleges is up more than a third. Median income is down almost \$1,000 for the average family; 1.4 million more Americans are unemployed. We don't have the unemployment figures for March, but as you know, both in January and February, employment went down. It went down last month 63,000.

This administration has one of the worst job-performance rates at creating new jobs of any administration since Herbert Hoover. Fifty-six percent of Americans rate the economy as poor,

according to a Pew poll, which is double the number of just a year ago, in January. So that is not a year ago, but 2 months ago.

Now, we have, last year, made a number of efforts to not only spur the economy, but to deal with the economic stress. We raised the minimum wage. As signed by the President, we increased college aid, signed by the President, passed an economic stimulus package in agreement with the President, which he signed. And we passed through the House a CHAMP Act, which was not ultimately passed. We tried to pass an SCHIP bill to do exactly what the President wanted to do, and that is add millions of children to the health insurance. That bill failed. We are going to try again. We passed an historic energy bill, which was, in fact, signed, and we passed an innovation agenda, legislation known as the COMPETES Act; innovation agenda on our side, COMPETES Act, ended up being.

We will be very focused on the economy as we move forward. Obviously one of our focuses is housing. Barney Frank has been working very, very hard on seeing how we can help those who are most distressed and at risk of losing their homes through foreclosure. He has a bill that he is working on for refinancing opportunities for borrowers facing foreclosure. It would provide assistance to States and cities to purchase foreclosed properties.

The House and Senate are negotiating a bill that will update FHA. As you know, in the stimulus package we upped the level of home value that could be insured, which was directed towards

trying to allow people to refinance homes on which there was significant value above the insurance rate because they otherwise could not get any credit to refinance and might lose their homes.

The Ways and Means Committee is working on housing tax measures that will give States tools to help homeowners increase availability of low-income housing.

The recommendations of Secretary Paulson will obviously receive very careful consideration. Chairman Frank believes that they are a positive step. In fact, many of the proposals that are included in the Paulson proposal were originally rejected by the administration as proposed by the House or Senate or Members of either body.

Moving ahead, we are just coming back from a 2-week break for Easter. We have coming up the Iraq supplemental, the budget. We hope to do the budget by April 17 if we can get agreement between the House and the Senate. There are significant differences, as you know.

The farm bill is in negotiation. We are hopeful that we can get those negotiations resolved.

I worked over the last 2 weeks with Jay Rockefeller and others on the FISA bill, which the administration is now in a position where they want to talk about possible compromises. I think, frankly, they were surprised that we would be able to get the votes for the bill that we passed on Thursday before we left. That was a good bill, strong Title I, allowed the telephone

companies, telecoms, to provide a defense using documents that otherwise would be unavailable to them; and thirdly, set up a commission to look at what happened and how to prevent -- to facilitate both the interception of communications while at the same time protecting the rights of Americans.

We are going to be talking about -- we need to pass the budget bill so we can get 302(a) allocations for the appropriation bill so they can start their work. And we are also going to be able -- the higher ed college opportunity affordable conference report. I hope to get that done by the end of April.

There will obviously be other issues, but the economy will be uppermost in our minds in trying to deal with Ways and Means, to stem the downturn, assist those who are most at risk and stressed by the economic slowdown, and try to facilitate the growth of our economy and the growth of jobs. Again, I hope all of you look at this report. I think you will find it useful in terms of an analysis and comparison between what the administration either said was going to happen or what has happened in previous administrations with reference to the economy.

On almost every criteria, this administration's performance has been one of the worst. There is no doubt that America, which was a very economically healthy nation with a declining budget deficit, with poverty down, that was inherited by this administration in January of 2001, is not in as good shape as it was then. And the American people and the Pew poll reflect that

conclusion as well.

Questions?

Q Mr. Hoyer, I have a Maryland question, if I could start off with that. There are concerns that a special election to replace Mr. Wynn would cost \$2 million, maybe more, pretty close to a whole new election in November.

Do you think that his district should have a special election or leave his seat vacant until November?

Mr. Hoyer. I am going to talk to the Governor about that. I have a call in to Donna Edwards to get her view on that. I have heard from Elijah Cummings that her view is that she wants to ensure that the constituents in the Fourth District are represented fully as soon as possible, a position with which I agree. Once I talk to Ms. Edwards, I am going to talk to the Governor and get his thoughts about moving ahead.

I was elected in a special election. It takes about 4 months, 10 weeks at the shortest, to get that done. One possibility, of course, to minimize the cost is to have a primary and then have the general in the November election, and that would not provide for representation, obviously, assuming Mr. Wynn -- Mr. Wynn has indicated he is going to resign sometime in June, I think. So June and July obviously will be months that we will be here and voting. August we will not be here. And we will be here for 3 weeks in September and then probably not here at all in October.

I am hopeful that we will finish our work by the end of September. But it is doubtful that the election could be done in less than 3, 3-1/2 months. So it is going to be inevitable that there will be some time that there will be a vacancy. I am not sure, frankly, whether the Governor can -- under law can schedule the election until the vacancy actually occurs. I haven't checked on that.

Q Would you have liked to have seen Mr. Wynn just stick it out another few months before taking his new job?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, whether I would have liked that or not, he did not discuss that with me. He did call me and tell me what he was doing. I suppose I acknowledged it, I guess, the day he announced it or a little before that, but he didn't discuss it with me.

Q Are you satisfied with his recusals in terms of --

Mr. Hoyer. I think it is absolutely essential that he does recuse himself, and I am not sure what he is going to do on the committee. There may be some thought that we need to have a full-voting committee member who does not need to recuse himself on issues, and therefore, there may be -- Mr. Wynn may decide to step down from the committee prior to leaving.

Q Mr. Leader, when do you expect to have the Iraq war supplemental on the floor? And what type of proposals are Democrats prepared to back to change course in Iraq at this point?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, clearly we have been making the effort over

the last year and a half now to try to move in a new direction or redeploy our troops, to have a policy that focuses on shifting responsibility to the Iraqis. The President keeps saying things are getting better. I think the American public's conclusion is, over the last week, that does not appear to be the case. It did not seem to be very successful at trying to quell a very unstable and unsatisfactory and unacceptable condition in Basra in the southern part of Iraq.

The supplemental, your question was when do I expect it to come. My expectation is it will be the latter part of this month or early next month, I would expect us to get that supplemental done within that time frame.

Q And will you push for -- would you push to attach amendments to change course in Iraq?

Mr. Hoyer. There may well be. I am one, as you know, who has suggested that funding and policy ought not to be married, if you will. And the reason for that is because I think policy needs to be changed, but as long as troops are deployed, those troops need to be supported. That is my view.

Q Do you have concerns that a protracted battle for the Democratic nomination could cost Democrats the White House as well as seats in Congress?

Mr. Hoyer. I would like to see this matter resolved before the August 25 convention. We have a number of primaries to go, as all of you know, including some large ones like Pennsylvania, but

very significant ones like North Carolina, Indiana, others.

There is always a concern that primaries, particularly if they are hard fought, could possibly be divisive. I, frankly, think that this has not been as tough a primary as we have necessarily had in the past. However, it appears to be more so -- and you have probably heard me express this -- uniquely, we have two candidates who are the personifications of major constituencies; Mr. Obama obviously of African-Americans, Hillary Clinton of women. And therefore, when one or the other is attacked by either third parties or they go after one another, it is not just them who is hearing -- the opponent who is hearing the disagreement, the attack, the whatever, however you want to characterize. It is the constituencies that they personify. And so to that extent, I think we need to be very careful, and I would urge both candidates and am going to urge both candidates to be positive in their approach.

We have two excellent candidates. I think Democrats across the board think that both of them would be excellent Presidents. And the answer to your last question is, I am confident that the American public is going to not want 8 more years of the Bush administration's policies, which have largely been endorsed by Mr. McCain at this point in time. So I think either one of them is going to win.

Q But couldn't this bleed down the ballot further? I mean, that is the issue. If there is a schism within the party,

couldn't that affect House races for the Democrats?

Mr. Hoyer. If there is a schism in the party, it could affect House races. I don't believe there is going to be a schism in the party. I think there is really overall agreement that the last 8 years have not been good ones for our country from the perspective of international policy and the perspective of domestic policy, and that is change is needed. The American public voted for that strongly last year in '06 -- not last year, in '06. And as I have observed, they only voted for real change in the House. Two-thirds of the Senators weren't on the ballot. The President wasn't on the ballot. This time they have that opportunity to make -- to consolidate that change from which they voted in '06. I think they are going to do that.

Q Mr. Hoyer, in your role as a party leader, do you think that as part of your job, once the primaries are over, before the convention, is it part of your job to try to mediate or force a solution?

Mr. Hoyer. I certainly think that my role as Majority Leader in the House, concerned about all of those who are going to be running -- you call it the down ballot. We hate to be referred to as the down ballot.

Q What is the proper term?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know. If I had a better one, I would give it to you right away. We are, generally speaking, down ballot; we are lower down on the ballot.

In any event, I think it is a proper role for any leader, myself or the Speaker or Governors or Senators or House Members. The proper role to play is trying to bring our party together to accomplish the real objective, and the real objective is electing a President who does not want to continue the failed policies of the Bush administration. Clearly Mr. McCain wants to follow those policies. He has articulated that.

Q Mr. Hoyer, how should this be resolved? How can this be resolved by August 25? Howard Dean proposed superdelegates voting by July 1.

Mr. Hoyer. Did Howard Dean do that? Or Governor Bredesen?

Q I believe Dean.

Mr. Hoyer. You may have better information than I do. I don't know that. I know Governor Bredesen of Tennessee suggested sort of convening superdelegates in June. I suppose not -- not, I suppose, for purposes of figuring out what they wanted to do as a group.

I am not sure that I am supportive of that idea, of convening this -- I call them ex officio delegates. This super business, I think, is -- you know, we are no better or worse than delegates elected as delegates. What we are is because of our positions, either as Governors, chairmen of parties, Senators, House Members, obviously significant leaders in our party, selected for the most part in Democratic primaries as representatives of the Democratic Party. I think that is an important thing to keep in mind. We

are not just Members of Congress, we are also representatives of our party. I am now the representative of my party, elected on February 12 by my party to be -- to be a Member of Congress. I will have to go through in November to be elected to Congress. But I am a representative of my party.

In that, our party made a determination that, as an ex officio matter, that Members of Congress, because they are significant leaders in our party, should be part of the decision-making process.

Q Senator Clinton has made pretty clear that she is going to keep on fighting until the convention. I mean, the only way to resolve this before the convention seems to be to have superdelegates vote before the convention or make their wishes known before the convention so that it is clear that the race is over seems the only way to resolve it. I mean, is there -- I mean, at least as far as I can tell, is there another way to resolve it that you might have in mind?

Mr. Hoyer. Yeah, I think there is. Let me tell you, in my early days, my younger days, I was a political leader in Prince George's County. We had what was called a breakfast club. People sat around the table just like this. We rarely ever voted. We did have, however, significant discussion in which we ultimately came to consensus on. That didn't mean everybody was in unanimity, but it did mean that everybody agreed that, well, that seems to be the logical conclusion to reach. So you don't

necessarily have to vote to reach such a conclusion. I hope I wasn't too elliptical on that.

Q Sir, when they do make this consensus, would you expect the superdelegates to fall in line with popular vote or with the count or which?

Mr. Hoyer. I have made it very clear that my view is that the ex officio delegates are ex officio delegates to use the judgment and experience that they have to assist our party nationally in making one of the most important decisions it makes. And I think we owe our judgment and experience to the party to accomplish that objective.

Q So not necessarily with the popular vote?

Mr. Hoyer. Let me make an additional observation. The people of Maryland voted on February 12. Between February 12 and August 25 is a long period of time. A lot of things are going to happen. The people of Maryland might have voted differently on, frankly, October 12 of the preceding year, may have voted differently on May 12. So that, again, the reason for the inclusion of ex officio delegates -- I am not going to sell that phrase to you, I know, because superdelegates sounds so --

Q That is down ballot.

Mr. Hoyer. I spoke at the Gridiron Banquet, and I said that Charlie Rangel -- I was subbing for Charlie Rangel because he didn't feel well. And so I said, you know, Charlie Rangel is Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, powerful position. I am

the Majority Leader, arguably a powerful position. I said, but our real power comes because we are both superdelegates. But then I said, superdelegates are just like any other delegate except, of course, we can fly, bend steel and subvert the will of the American people. It was a good line, got some laughs.

But the projection of that is what we can do is not the case. After all, we are one-fourth of the -- less than one-fourth of the delegates, so that if three-quarters of the delegates come to a conclusion, which I hope they could, the superdelegates don't make a difference. The only time when we make a difference really is -- and we haven't made a difference over the last few -- a lot of conventions. I think '84 may have been the last time superdelegates -- and they really didn't make the difference then -- are when a consensus has not been reached. And so then they bring their -- again, I keep using this -- their experience. And they are also all accountable; not all, but most of us are accountable.

In November I have to stand for reelection, so whatever decision I make in August will be a component part of what my constituents in my district think of me. If they think my judgment was good, they will say, hooray. If they think my judgments were lousy and wrong and subverted them, they can vote against me.

That is not true of the delegates who are elected otherwise, because they are not going to be on the ballot next time. The

Edwards delegates presumably will make such decision as they deem appropriate, or, you know, John Edwards may give them some advice or counsel as to how he thinks they ought to vote.

But the bottom line is all of the delegates, all 4,000-plus of us, want to reach a determination on selecting a candidate who can win the Presidency to take our country in a new direction and to change the failed policies of the last 8 years which have resulted in an economy that is in real trouble and in international posture that is not anywhere close to being as good as it was in 2000.

Q Mr. Hoyer, the President yesterday put the Colombia Free Trade Agreement on his short list of what the Congress should be doing between now and the next break. What is the state of play on that? What will the Democratic response be if the President decides to force a vote?

Mr. Hoyer. My expectation is, and based upon conversations with the administration, that the administration does, in fact, intend to send up Colombia at some point in time. The Speaker, I think rightfully, has indicated that the administration ought to send it up only after discussions with the leadership and some sort of agreement on how this is going to be considered, and I think hopefully that will happen.

Q Can I ask a quick FISA question? You said the administration was willing to compromise?

Mr. Hoyer. On FISA?

Q You said they were willing to compromise. Is that that based on conversations you have had?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q And can you give us any sense of where they would be willing to compromise?

Mr. Hoyer. No. And let me tell you, but I am going to follow up on it. I don't mean it blithely, though, but because we haven't discussed the specifics.

Frankly, the discussions I have had with the White House were essentially, look, we invited you to meetings. You didn't come to meetings. They came to one meeting, and I appreciated that. We invite them to meetings. They didn't sit down. Very frankly, I don't think they thought we had the votes, and I think they were pretty candid about that. We didn't think you had the votes, and when we found you had the votes, okay, you have the votes for your bill.

We need to sit down and talk about a bill that we can agree on to make any bill a law. I have talked to Mr. Rockefeller. Hopefully you saw Mr. Rockefeller's statement before. He thought what we had done was a constructive step forward. I have talked to Senator Rockefeller, I think, three times over the last 2 weeks, maybe twice over the last 2 weeks. I think he thinks we are making positive progress. He is talking to a number of people on the administration side.

I continue to talk to the other side of the aisle,

particularly Mr. Blunt and I have had discussions. As you know, we work together. Often we don't agree, but we have an ability to work constructively together, and we are doing that. And Mr. Blunt has indicated as well he wants to see if we can reach agreement. So I think there is a different environment than there was before the vote 2 weeks ago.

Q Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 11:09 a.m., the press conference concluded.]