

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

Wednesday, September 5, 2007

11:05 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Hello, how is everybody? Well rested? I see some tans around the room.

Thank you very much for being here. I hope you had a good break. I had a very busy break myself. I'm sure many of you had a very busy break yourselves, if you had a break. I hope you did.

I'm going to reiterate at the outset sort of a recap of our accomplishments. The New York Times had an article, I don't know if you saw it, which in effect compared the 1995 first 7 months of the Gingrich Congress, after the victory with the President of the opposite party, and the first 7 months of this Congress. Exactly the same situation.

We not only compared favorably; we succeeded on almost every criteria put forth, the accomplishments, including even that which we have not gotten done or can't get through the Senate. I just want to go through it quickly, but I know all of you know this and it will sound redundant. But we are starting again, and I want to know where we are starting from and I want to reiterate that.

The 9/11 Commission recommendations that got passed. Minimum wage passed and signed. Change in the way business is doing. Lobbying and ethics reform; we are sending that down to the President. We got that passed. We presume he is going to sign that. PAYGO has been adopted as a way

forward. We have complied with that. Equipping America's work on the innovation agenda, we think that is a very positive step forward over the next few months. And we hope to pass making college more affordable. We passed that early on and have now got it going to conference. Hope we will be out on that. We passed the CHIP act through both houses, as you know. We are figuring out what to do in conference and how to reconcile the two bills. Energy independence, we passed that. And we passed a number of items trying to challenge Bush's policy on Iraq.

Now, they have not been signed into law. There is a disagreement between the Congress -- a majority in Congress and the President, as all of us know, and we will continue to address that issue this month, next month, and until such time as we change our policies which we think are not working.

The GAO -- obviously Iraq is going to be a major focus this month. The GAO report was out. It indicated that some 6 months or 5 months after the surge, only 3 of the 18 benchmarks set by the President have been met. And it says, quote, It is unclear whether sectarian violence in Iraq has decreased, a key security benchmark.

Clearly, the President's visit, I think, was an interesting visit in that he did not visit Baghdad which is the capital, which is the area which has been of serious

concern. We have known for some months now that as a direct result of the al Qaeda attacks on Sunni leadership that in Anbar province the Sunni leadership, as one would expect, has responded to al Qaeda and has allied itself more closely now with U.S. troops to face what is now a common enemy: al Qaeda's attack on the Sunnis.

The comptroller general, David Walker, who is obviously appointed by the administration but is very independent -- has got a 15-year term -- said the least progress has been made on the political front. I think all of us have observed that, the Malaki government having great problems keeping its government together, many resignations. And Malaki himself has obviously been very defensive in terms of the criticism.

But the independent reports I think have established a clear pattern that we are not accomplishing our objectives, notwithstanding the President's comment. We will have next week, of course, a very important week because we are going to have General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker who will be testifying on the 10th in the House and the 11th in the Senate. There will be a number of hearings as well on related matters by the Armed Services Committee in both the Senate and in the House.

Obviously, once we consider those reports, we will try to decide what action we will take at that point in time,

and my presumption is that we will be discussing that not only in the latter part of Tuesday, but certainly the very beginning of the following week, and try to come to grips with what action we deem is appropriate in response to the report.

Let me say that, as all of you know, while I set forth an agenda that we were going to accomplish in the last 2 weeks, all of which we accomplished, in the House of Representatives -- all of which we accomplished. The delay that has occurred, some has been in the House. Let me tell you where I think is the delay. I wanted to pass, as all of you know, the appropriations bills by June 30th. I did not get that accomplished, we did not get that accomplished in large part because of the earmarks. The earmarks have been halved. They are more transparent. As Congressman Flake himself observed, the Democrats had the courage to amend the rules to make these transparent, which the Republicans never did, and to substantially reduce the numbers both in terms of numbers and substantially the dollars.

But as a result of getting that accomplished and getting the staff work that was necessary to get that accomplished, we delayed the appropriations process. But we passed all 12 appropriations bills, but we are obviously late because the Senate has not passed 11 of the 12. They passed the 12th, the Homeland Security, on July 25th or

26th, somewhere in that neighborhood.

So we are hopefully going to go in the process of trying to conference these bills, and it would be unrealistic to expect that we are going to get 12 conferences done by the 30th of September. I regret that personally, but that is the reality we confront.

Furthermore, obviously there has been continuing Senate Republican opposition to even going to conference on some of these bills, which I think is unfortunate.

Let me anticipate for you perhaps a question. The administration has indicated they are going to veto some of the bills. That is unfortunate. The administration crows about the success of its economic package. I think that is not accurate. Let me review for you some figures.

When the Bush administration took office, the Congressional Budget Office projected revenues, \$2.816 trillion in 2007. That was their projection. That was CBO's projection.

Actual revenues are projected at \$2.577 trillion. So when you hear revenues are way up, revenues are expanding, this is wonderful news, our program is working, they are \$239 billion less than they projected they would be. Revenues have grown by just 3.9 percent in the years since Bush's economic plan was enacted in 2001, less than the 8.4 percent annual growth during the Clinton administration.

Less than half. The economy has grown by an average of 2.4 percent over the last 6 years, below the 3.9 percent annual growth from '93 to 2000.

Now, why am I saying this? Because that is the basis on which the administration has posited its fiscal responsibility claim now. They've spent more, made less, and the economy has grown less under their economic policies.

Now the administration has indicated it is going to veto our bills because they are over the numbers they suggested. In other words, we're not the rubber-stamp Congress that they had dealt with for the last 6 years.

But let me give you these figures as well. We will go over these again. I'm going to give a speech at the end of this month in which I will be talking about these as well. But appropriations for fiscal year '08 were 53 billion above the '07 levels adjusted for inflation. That is a healthy figure; 81 percent were for increases requested by the administration for military and homeland security programs; 81 percent was for programs requested by the administration on the military or homeland security.

The President requested an increase of \$43.1 billion, 11.3 percent, for military and homeland security operations. We have appropriated 45.7. So \$2 billion we have done mainly for homeland security. Some of the stuff they don't

like, like the cargo checking. But the overwhelming majority of the increases are for keeping America safe, with which we have agreed with the administration.

For the remaining eight domestic appropriations bills the President would cut spending by \$16.1 billion. In other words, for education, health care, law enforcement, environmental protection, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, the President wants a \$16.1 billion cut below the fiscal '07 levels adjusted for inflation. That is important to understand. I'm talking about baseline figures adjusted for inflation.

So a in nominal terms the President can stay no, I didn't ask for a cut, I just asked for a slowing in growth. But, of course, all of you know if you spent \$100 last year, you can't buy the same thing this year that you bought for \$100 last year. So you get \$101 and 3 percent inflation, you're 2 percent down. That is my point. I wanted to make sure you understand. I am not saying that he cut 16.1 billion from last year's figures; he cut 16.1 billion from these eight domestic bills from our baseline bill.

Our budget rejects those cuts and would increase spending on the domestic side in a \$2.7 trillion budget by \$5 billion above baseline in eight domestic discretionary bills of some \$500 billion, or really a little more than that, eight-tenths of a percent.

And for that, the President indicates he is going to veto bills, notwithstanding the fact he signed every bill that was sent to him last time, for the last 6 years, which increased spending very substantially above the increase in the Clinton years -- the rate of spending.

So I'm hopeful that we will work this out. I am hopeful that we do not run our ship of state aground because the President wants to posture to his conservative base who are upset with him, obviously, on a number of things that he has now become the fiscal watchdog that he was not for the first 6 years of his administration, which took us from a \$5.6 trillion surplus to approximately a \$2.8 trillion deficit.

I will stop on that.

Q Mr. Hoyer, the Republicans this morning appointed their three members to the ethics subcommittee that is going to investigate this vote questioned during the last session. Mr. Hulshof, Mr. LaTourette, and Mr. Pence each came out and gave extensive statements.

Do you find the fact that they are talking about this actively -- usually when there have been ethics inquiries before, the members of the subcommittee have said we are going to investigate this thoroughly, and that is about it and would go behind closed doors. It seems as though there may be a tinge of partisanship by the nature of what they

were saying and how they thought how this vote might be. Do you think that was appropriate for them to come out and make these statements?

Mr. Hoyer. I'm not sure exactly what the definition of "tinge" is. However, this is a gargantuan -- I wish I had the obverse of tinge. Does anybody have an idea of what the obverse of tinge would be? "Cascade" of politics and partisanship. This is not about, in my opinion, process.

This vote took 25 minutes, give or take 2 minutes. The vote was never called finally until every Member, all 428 Members, had an opportunity to vote as they chose to vote; three Republicans changed their vote, five Democrats changed their vote, and the vote was 212 to 216. In an attempt to distract from the extraordinary accomplishments of the last 2 weeks of the session before we adjourned on August 3rd, the Republicans had a tantrum.

Now I believe, because I believe the process was fair, although certainly messy, that looking at this was not a problem. I wasn't prepared to see that tabled. I think they went too far as they kept making these motions, two or three following motions that we tabled. But I do think, in answer directly to your question, and I'm surprised I didn't know about that, and I'm surprised that without considering the facts, discussing it -- unless they prejudged this matter, I'm not sure what they said, but --

Q Well, when I pressed them on that later, they said -- this was their word -- an "exhortation" to the Democrats to make sure that this did not go away. This happened a month ago and they wanted to make sure that you guys were taking this issue seriously.

Mr. Hoyer. We didn't table it. They consistently -- those of you who cover Congress -- they consistently tabled any motions made with respect to any of the questions that we raised. Consistently tabled. They didn't set up any select committees, they didn't have the Ethics Committee review. Now, the 3-hour vote was such -- somebody on the Republican side said this is the most egregious thing they have seen. Those of you who cover Congress, there was no egregious here. There was a vote that ended up 212 to 216 after everybody voted, everybody had the opportunity to change their vote, and they lost. And they lost on a motion that would have killed the bill, which was a proposition that is already lost.

It was purely politics, solely politics, only politics, and I hope it doesn't continue to be politics. But we have taken it seriously.

Q If I could follow up on that. There were several Democrats who voted for that, even though it was a motion that would have killed the bill. It was to bring back "promptly" instead of "forthwith."

Mr. Hoyer. Correct.

Q And that was an area where you said you asked all Democrats as a matter of party discipline to vote against that. Does that present any problem for the rule or the advice that you have laid out?

Mr. Hoyer. It did present a problem, obviously. It presented a big problem. We are working on it. I am going to continue to work on it. I think "promptly" is not an honest -- strike that. "Promptly" is a political, not a legislative device.

Now we have used "promptly" in the past, mainly for tax bills. Why tax bills? You can't amend tax bills on the floor. And relevancy and germaneness is hard on some tax bills, depending on what you want to do. We used promptly to go back to the committee and do subsequent things.

However, on offering these motions, which are largely centered on "gotcha" amendments, in this case immigration which they believe is a hot-button political issue -- and Republicans like to use hot-button political issues, particularly when they deal with emotionally charged issues. Pretty touch language, and I mean it.

Q You asked them not to do that. They did it. Is there any consequences for that as floor leader?

Mr. Hoyer. In terms of the Members, the consequences are I'm going to talk to them. But they will be delighted

to talk to me, I know. You know, we don't want to kill bills. Frankly, the Republicans didn't vote on the bill, ultimately. At least most of them didn't. They either voted present or they walked off the floor. You know, the bill came out in a fairly unanimous vote. Then the pay-fors were not agreed to. The Republicans jettisoned pay-fors. They don't like to pay for things. That is why we went to an \$8 trillion turnaround in the debt. They don't like to pay for things. They like to buy things. They bought more things than we did. But they don't like to pay for them.

Q Could you talk about the SCHIP bill? You are coming up to a deadline.

Mr. Hoyer. The 30th is the --

Q There is a difference between your bill and the Senate bill. Is there any chance you would have to do an extension of the program?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I guess the honest answer is that there may be a chance of doing that. I hope that doesn't happen. I hope we can work out the difference between the House and the Senate and work out a SCHIP bill and send it to the President before the end of the month.

Q Mr. Leader, there were a group of Republicans and Democrats yesterday who wrote a letter to Speaker Pelosi and Leader Boehner calling for more bipartisanship and cooperation on Iraq. And I wonder if you think the

Democratic leadership is ready to do that, to seek some kind of comity with Republicans who are interested in perhaps bringing troops home, but not interested in the hard deadlines that the Democratic leadership has been pushing.

Mr. Hoyer. I think my assumption is the letter was written in good faith. I think it is further indication of the Republican erosion of solidarity. John Warner's comments certainly, and his suggestions to the President to bring 5,000 troops home by December 31st, is another indication of that. I accept at face value the good faith of those who have written that letter. I certainly would be pleased to talk to Mr. Castle and any of the others who signed that letter about the possibilities of agreement.

Q But are you seeing discontent among Democrats who feel like their leadership is being too partisan and too confrontational?

Mr. Hoyer. You have seen our Democratic Party pretty unified and we have 233 and we have gotten, with very little Republican voting, a number of bills passed. So I think there is a pretty high level of unity on our side. Obviously, five Democrats signed that letter as you know. Six Republicans, five Democrats; John Tanner, in particular, who has worked with Mr. Abercrombie on a piece of legislation I would like to see us move forward on. I don't think that is "the" piece of legislation, but certainly I

think the President ought to come up with a plan for redeployment rather than simply say stay the course without deviation.

But I think that Members would want to see a change of plans in Iraq. And whether that's done in a partisan basis or bipartisan basis, I think we want to see a change. So I think there are a number of Members who would like to see us move ahead and see how we could build consensus, Democrats and Republicans, on changing our direction in Iraq. So the answer is I think this is a positive -- positive move by them.

Q Will the leaders continue to seek a time line for withdrawals in this Chamber?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think the answer to that question is "probably." That we believe that without a time line, so many of the generals have indicated that the Iraqis are not going to step up to the plate, that the Iraqi Government is not going to make the political decisions nor the military decisions that it needs to make in order to be able to sustain itself, which ultimately is its responsibility.

Q What was your reaction to Representative Baird coming back from Iraq last month saying that the surge should get more time -- and I believe he said he would not vote for any more of the time line legislation -- is that a growing sentiment in the caucus or is he out there all

alone?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know that he is out there all alone. I haven't talked to anybody else. I haven't seen anybody else make that comment. I haven't talked to Congressman Baird about it. I haven't talked to him about it. My reaction was that I wanted to talk to him and find out what his thoughts were. I have not done that, so I can't respond beyond that because I don't know specifically what he meant.

Clearly, all of you know that any action taken by the Congress will be done within the framework of assuring the safety and security of our people, and that no withdrawal is going to be done either overnight, in a week, or in a month. As a result, the surge will obviously be given, has been given now -- depending upon when you think the surge was accomplished in terms of getting the 30,000 people on the ground, if that was the criteria. But I think that the time lines, as I said, are still necessary if we are going to give to the Iraqis a sense that there is a time within which they are going to have to accomplish the objective of becoming able to defend themselves and maintain their security.

Q Mr. Hoyer, on FISA, when the bill passed just before the recess, a number of Democrats in both houses said they didn't want to wait for 6 months to revise that legislation.

Is that what's going to happen?

Mr. Hoyer. I'm glad you asked that question because I think that's a very important issue. The FISA legislation that passed obviously passed with a large number of Democrats voting against it. We had voted for a bill that, you know, was, we thought, a reasonable attempt after extensive discussions with the Director of National Intelligence, Admiral McConnell. I personally was involved in those discussions and, as I expressed on the floor, I was disappointed because I thought we had come much closer than the DNI indicated in his press release, which seemed to me to be written in the White House. It may not have been, but it seemed to me to have been written in the White House. More political than substantive, in my opinion.

Having said that, we were up against a deadline. We don't want to be up against that deadline again. I know Mr. Reyes and Mr. Rockefeller both believe that we ought to move within a relatively short time frame -- certainly well before the 6-month sunset of the FISA authorization that passed -- so that we have time to not only discuss with the administration coming together and trying to reach agreement on what both protects the Americans from terrorist attack, provides for the interdiction of communications and plans to commit terrorist acts, but at the same time protects the civil liberties of our people and upholds the standards of

our Constitution.

We think we can accomplish both. Frankly, I thought we were closer to accomplishing both than we ended up doing, in my opinion. But I expect, Chuck, that we are talking about hopefully coming up with alternatives prior to the next 60 days.

[Whereupon, at 12:00 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]