

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, October 2, 2007

11:30 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning. Thank you so much for being here. I enjoyed the Press Club on Friday. I gave a speech there, as some of you saw, you were there, on fiscal responsibility and how I thought the Democrats were the party of fiscal responsibility. I demonstrated that during the 1990s, and we are again demonstrating it in this session of the Congress.

I also discussed how I thought that this administration and the Republican-led Congress during the first 6 years of this administration had arguably pursued the most fiscally irresponsible policies perhaps in our history, but certainly in recent decades. I discussed how I thought that the Democratic Party's focus on fiscal responsibility was one of the least reported or underreported stories of this Congress in perhaps the last decade.

In the President's statements about vetoing appropriations bills, of course he says they were \$23 billion over the suggested mark that he made. I pointed out in my speech that in 4 of the last 5 years Republicans -- Congress says we are over on domestic spending the President's numbers. But the way they fudged that was to reduce the defense numbers that the President asked for and then asked for supplementals to cover those costs. So it

really had nothing to do with saving money, it simply had to do with how you designated the money.

If it was emergency spending, somehow the President thinks that money is for free. He is asking for \$190 billion, a blank check essentially, for Iraq; 147- in a supplemental. One, 43 million in a supplemental; and two, which we haven't gotten yet, or \$190 billion additional funds which he suggested he wants. None of it is paid for. He doesn't suggest paying for it, yet he is now putting himself in a position where if we don't pay for the \$23 billion, which we have paid for, which is included and covered by a budget which provides for a balance by 2012, that he will veto the appropriation bills.

I think that is a continuation of fiscal irresponsibility of this administration and the lack of proper priorities. Seventy percent of the American public in -- the Washington Post ABC poll shows 70 percent want that number that he has requested for Iraq reduced. We will see what happens with that.

On the CHIP program, the Children's Health Insurance Program, which some of you were at a press conference downstairs, that bill has now passed both Houses overwhelmingly with big bipartisan votes. Another recent poll indicates that approximately 75 percent of America believes that the President ought to sign that bill;

82 percent of Democrats, 69 percent of Independents and 61 percent Republicans. Six out of every ten Republicans believes the President ought to sign this bill.

Notwithstanding that, he continues to take the posture that he is going to veto the bill; notwithstanding his representation to the American public that he wanted to add millions of children to the CHIP program that were currently eligible in 2004, but were not covered in 2004. This bill does exactly what the President said he wanted to do. Notwithstanding that, he says he is going to veto it, and his alternative is to offer us a bill to increase funding, which will have a net result of reducing the number of children covered in America by over 800,000 children.

America is not going to think that is compassionate, and it is going to think it is not even conservative. It is going to think it is very poor policy and bad for children, bad for our country.

On Iraq today we will have a vote on a bipartisan bill which has been pending for some period of time. The Abercrombie-Tanner legislation which passed the Armed Services Committee on a vote of 55 to 2 in the latter part of July, we expect that bill to receive significant bipartisan support. And what it says is as a premise that we need, Mr. President, for you to tell us how you would redeploy troops.

The majority of the American public wants a new direction in Iraq. We have been fighting for a new direction in Iraq. But certainly one of the first steps to take in succeeding in that effort is to get from the administration, more importantly from DOD and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, what a responsible redeployment plan would look like. And as I said, we expect this to pass handily. And it requires the President to submit within 60 days. Hopefully the Senate will be able to pass that bill. As I said, it passed out of committee 55 to 2.

Before I go to questions, let me say that we are going to be considering several bills on the suspension of rules: a resolution to condemn the violence in Burma, the Tanner-Abercrombie bill which I discussed will be on the floor.

Wednesday we will have a bill on the floor which relates to contracting personnel like Blackwater that are currently, we believe, in a very confused accountability state where the criminal law in the United States may not apply, the military justice system may not apply, and this bill seeks to clarify that. In addition, there will be a bill on approving government accountability generally.

On Thursday we will have the Regional Economic and Infrastructure Development Act. This is for the New England area. There was a huge bill on the floor on suspension

which we believe had the support, but for political reasons it didn't want to give a victory to Mr. Hodes and to Mr. Michaud on this issue, which is unfortunate. We think this will pass on the floor under a rule.

Last, the Mortgage Forgiveness Death Relief Act out of the Ways and Means Committee, the President articulated, and frankly we think got from the Ways and Means Committee, the thought that it is terribly unfair and counterproductive to have the IRS deem as a taxable incident the forgiveness of a mortgage debt because of foreclosure. So not only do people lose their homes, but they are then faced with a tax liability. This bill will seek to ameliorate that issue.

Questions?

Q Mr. Obey and Murtha and McGovern in a press conference this morning, they talk about having a supplemental, and I invite your reaction. First, he said there will be no supplemental until the President makes changes on Iraq policy. And second, he said that a supplemental needs to be paid for with a surtax.

Do you support the strategy including a surtax?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, we are going to discuss Mr. Obey's proposal clearly in the leadership. There has been no decision on that. This is, as Mr. Obey pointed out, his proposal, a proposal of Mr. Murtha and Mr. McGovern. This is not policy which the Speaker or I have signed off on.

I want to say I agree with Mr. Obey's proposition that this President, and I mentioned it earlier, spent \$190 billion additional this year. We are going to hit \$1 trillion on this war before too long, and the President is very willing to simply pass the cost along to future generations, to our children and grandchildren. Mr. Obey's observation that America is not paying for this war, except for the families who are sending young and not so young people in theater, who are losing family members or are having those family members badly injured, the costs of this war are going to be with us for a very long period of time. Mr. Obey and Mr. Murtha and Mr. McGovern are saying this generation ought to help pay for that. I agree with that proposition.

But there is no agreement, and this is not a Democratic proposal. One of the stories I just read said the Democrats proposed. This is a proposal by Mr. Obey, Mr. Murtha and Mr. McGovern. This is not a party proposal.

Q Could you imagine a surtax would get 218 votes and that the American public would embrace it?

Mr. Hoyer. Richard, I don't want to speculate on that. As I said, I agree with the proposition that this generation of Americans ought to help pay for the war that we are carrying on. Now, whether that means that we need to have a tax increase at this point in time, we haven't discussed

that. And I don't want to take a position on it at this point in time, but I think the general proposition is correct.

Q Mr. Hoyer, Mr. Boehner is characterizing this Tanner-Abercrombie bill that is coming to the floor today basically as meaningless, saying that it is the sense of the House that it carries no weight, and that contingency planning is already under way anyway. How would you characterize it?

Mr. Hoyer. I think this will be a very significant vote in which I believe an overwhelming majority of the Congress and the United States will say to the President, we need a plan for redeployment. And I think that is going to be a very significant statement. It passed out of committee 55 to 2.

Mr. Boehner hopefully is right. Hopefully the Pentagon has contingency plans. We don't know about those contingency plans. This bill not only requires them 60 days to let us know what the contingency plans are, but says every 90 days thereafter we ought to be kept abreast of the fact.

Mr. Boehner was a leader for some of the time, not most of the time, in the most complicit, complacent Congress in which I have served, from 2001 to January of 2007, when the Congress had little oversight, was complacent in the face of

the executive department, both making very substantial exceptions in letters that they signed during the course of signing bills with almost no oversight of performance either economically or militarily.

This Congress is a new Congress, a different Congress. We have demanded accountability, we have exercised oversight, and we are pursuing the articulation of plans to redeploy the troops. This is part of that effort.

Q A quick follow-up?

Mr. Hoyer. I think Mr. Boehner perhaps believes that a lot of his people are going to be voting for it, so he is trying to diminish its impact.

Q In late July and August, some members of your caucus vehemently opposed putting this bill onto the floor and said that it was just going to be political cover for Republicans to avoid a tougher vote. What does it say about the Democratic leadership that you are now putting it on the floor and your decision to pursue perhaps a more conciliatory or bipartisan approach to Iraq?

Mr. Hoyer. Our objective is to change direction in Iraq. My view is those who want to support us in doing that are welcome.

Q This was, as I have seen in some of the talking points, billed as to the first in a series of Iraq votes. What else will be coming up, and what will the kind of

strategy be in terms of getting Republican votes?

Mr. Hoyer. There are a lot of options. I think we certainly are going to reconsider the Tauscher bill, which got the majority of the votes in the Senate, but didn't cut off a filibuster. The Senate is in the position where -- and I think the American public is very frustrated. They think the majority of the people, the majority of the Congress agrees on something, but notwithstanding that can't do it in a democracy where the Majority rules.

In fact, the minority rules in the Senate. The Republican obstructionists in the Senate have precluded the Senate from working its will, of reflecting the will of the American public. The Republican obstructionists believe that doing nothing is an alternative which they think will anger the American public. They are doing that. It is a continuation of the Gingrich strategy of confrontation, of wedge issues, of trying to bring down the Congress because you convince the American public it's not working.

What's not working is the Republican Minority of the United States Senate, who is not allowing the Majority will to be reflected.

Q Mr. Hoyer, can you tell us about your plans in the Employment Nondiscrimination Act? There has been some controversy about who should be included in that.

Mr. Hoyer. That is an understatement, but, yes, there

has been some controversy, and Mr. Miller and his committee are working on that, working with Members of Congress, working with members of the community outside.

It is clear that we want to pass legislation which prohibits discrimination in the workplace. We don't think discrimination in the workplace based upon nonemployment requirements, that is, the ability to do certain functions of a job either intellectually or manually, we don't think they should be in play. We are trying to forge a bill that can garner a majority of votes in both the House and the Senate in order to achieve that objective. And as you say, there are some controversies related to that, and we are working on them.

My expectation is, though, in answer to your question, that we will consider that bill on the floor of the House this month.

Q Where Congress is going to debate an Internet access tax moratorium, the GAO has found that access taxes don't actually discourage customers from getting on line. Actually, it shows that the States that currently tax the Internet have actually seen broadband expand at a faster rate than the national nationwide trend.

Do you still support a moratorium on the Internet access tax, and do you think it should be made permanent?

Mr. Hoyer. We are going to pass a moratorium. Whether

they make it permanent or not, I don't want to say at this point in time. I want to talk to the committees on this. But I think that we are going to have an Internet tax moratorium of some type on the floor relatively soon, and I expect it to pass.

Q Given that it is not nationally an argument for it, let's say, would -- that access taxes would curb the growth of broadband, if that's not the case, why provide this exception for this one?

Mr. Hoyer. I think generally that Congress believes that signing onto the Internet, getting information, transmitting information should not be a taxable event. Now, we understand, obviously, there is a telephone tax, so that is not totally consistent. But I think generally speaking that would be the view of most Members of Congress.

Q Could you give us the real reason for the stall in the energy bill?

Mr. Hoyer. As opposed to a feigned reason?

Q As opposed to the political spin in terms of are they just reading the bill.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I don't think that is spin, and they are reading the bill. And, very frankly, they have been very successful at it. I think they are making real progress at that. The energy expert in my office, who I think is expert as anybody in this House, indicates to me

that they are making progress, and she is very optimistic, and, therefore, I share that optimism because I trust her judgment.

I have been discussing with Mr. Dingell and others the status of the energy bill, and the leadership will be discussing it. We would like to see an energy bill passed and sent to the President before we leave in November.

Q What is the progress that has been made?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, they have gotten through the bill, and they are seeing what the differences are. Obviously there are two big differences that we all know on the RPS, and the renewable standards for electric companies and the CAFE standards are two of the biggest ones.

In addition to that, as you know, Mr. Dingell and this committee has a global warming bill under consideration at hearings. They are working on it. They are going to move ahead on that. He doesn't know how quickly he can get it done.

It is my intention to complete, it is my hope -- intention and hope go together, I suppose -- but to complete things that we would initiate in the House by the middle of November when we take the break for the Thanksgiving break. And then when we come back, if, in fact, we come back, I would be hopeful that we can do our work.

But the appropriation process, we will have to see how

that goes by the middle of November. But I would hope that we would have very significant progress, if not completion, on an energy conference report within the next 6 weeks?

Q Leader Reid in the other body condemns these comments by Rush Limbaugh of "phony soldiers." What is your reaction to this, and what do you think of Mr. Udall's resolution to condemn Rush Limbaugh?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, we passed a resolution the other day condemning MoveOn.org, or at least expressing disagreement, some would say condemning MoveOn.org. I want to make it clear that if there was condemnation in that resolution, it was of what they said, I don't think a blanket of the organization itself.

Mr. Limbaugh, as I said, as I observed, it is my understanding, reiterated a statement made by one of his callers which called Senator Hagel "Senator Betray Us" and reiterated "phony soldier." Now, there was an analysis of that written by somebody -- I am not sure who it was; maybe it was somebody around this table -- that indicated he talked about soldiers, although now he is talking about he was talking about a soldier.

Without parsing those words, let me say I think Mr. Hall and Mr. Udall have talked to me about a resolution which would speak to this. What is good for the goose is good for the gander.

I think, frankly, I would like to see us try to restrain ourselves in condemning through resolutions all of that with which we disagree. I have a zillion resolutions that I can think of pursuing that objective, but if you have one person saying "General Betray Us" and one person saying "Senator Betray Us," it seems to me they are both equally subject to condemnation.

Q Mr. Hoyer, on CHIP do you realistically expect any House Republican to change their vote on the override question, and how big an issue do you think this will be in 2008?

Mr. Hoyer. I think it is going to be a very big issue. But I don't -- you heard Speaker Pelosi say last week that this issue is not going to go away. We don't intend to -- if the President vetoes it and we can't override his veto -- I am hopeful that we can override his veto. I'm hopeful that there are about -- we think we need about 15 Republicans.

Q Do you think any of those 15 are ready to change?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know of any of the 15 right now, but I know that an awful lot of people are appealing to Republicans who voted no on the bill initially to vote yes on the override, that this is the best opportunity to add children.

As I said, the President's proposal is to reduce the

numbers by 800,000. It is incomprehensible, not inconceivable. I started to say inconceivable. It is not inconceivable, unfortunately, but it is incomprehensible to me that a President who represents to the American public that he wants to add millions of children who are currently eligible, that was in 2004, but not included in the CHIP program, to now turn around and veto a bill that does exactly that and make an alternative proposal which actually cuts children, that is 180 degrees from the representation he made in 2004.

Senator Grassley, Senator Hatch, if you heard them yesterday and last week, have said that the President is misinformed, he is getting bad advice, that this bill would not socialize medicine and would not do what -- the President continued. He loves his New York analogy of \$83,000. New York wants to go to 400 percent of poverty. The waiver to do so was turned down by this administration. This bill does not require that, and, in fact, discourages going above 300 percent.

Now, it was 200 percent. Going to 300 percent, I will tell you this, health care costs have escalated. We ought to get these figures, by the way, Katie. But health care costs have increased at a substantially greater amount than have incomes, so that while 200 percent of poverty may have been good in years past, we find families up to \$43,000 or

even \$60,000, two parents making \$30,000 in the Washington metropolitan area, both of them working for firms that don't provide health insurance, but are trying to maintain a home, food, gas and their car to get to work, they are stretched, and they may not be able to afford health care.

But this \$83,000 is a bogus figure which requires waiver by the administration in order to attain. And the overwhelming, overwhelming number of children, overwhelming, 75 percent of the children plus, that would be covered by this CHIP bill are in families making less than \$42,000.

Q What about the eight Democrats who voted no? Are they under pressure to sustain or to override a veto?

Mr. Hoyer. I think we are going to get a good number of the Democrats. Congressman Boren has already sent out a press release saying that he has decided that although he doesn't like the whole bill, that he is going to vote for it, I think we are going to get the three Democrats who weren't here; we will get all three of them who will vote for the override.

Ms. Watson has already told me she is going to vote to override. She told me, and I love this line, that her "P" was for protest. It was the President, but it was a "P" for protest, because she believes that in this case that children who are legally here ought to be covered, notwithstanding the fact they haven't been here 5 years.

I would be surprised if we didn't get the majority of those who voted no on the Democrat side to vote for it, vote for an override.

Q Can you just briefly talk to the Senate on moving individual approps bills? Can you give us a status update?

Mr. Hoyer. I had a meeting with Senator Reid yesterday. We had a good discussion. We are going to have some more discussions with David Obey, members of the Appropriations Committee, the staff and the leadership to try to figure out how we get from where we are now to where we need to be.

As I have said, there is so little difference between ourselves and what the President is requesting relatively speaking. I don't mean that \$23 billion is an insignificant sum. It is not. But in juxtaposition to \$190 billion to Baghdad as opposed to \$23 billion for kids in the United States, health care in the United States, college access in the United States, law enforcement in the United States, veterans benefits in the United States -- as a matter of fact we are \$4 billion over on veterans, and the President says he is going to sign that bill.

It's not about money. It's about politics. It's about posturing. It's about trying to pander to a conservative base that is very angry at an administration that took us from a \$5.6 trillion surplus to a \$3 trillion deficit, at an

administration that has signed every appropriation bill. Without exception, there has never been a veto of an appropriation bill by this President, not because those bills, as I have told you, weren't over his domestic numbers. They were. But, of course, they were Republican bills, so I guess they weren't deficits. It is only Democrat bills that are deficits.

This President does not want to pay for things, but now he wants to pretend for political reasons that somehow he is going to reinstate his conservative bona fides. The farm bill was way over what he asked for, and he signed the farm bill. The prescription drug bill he knew was \$125 billion to \$130 billion over what he projected. He signed the bill.

Q When do you anticipate taking the override vote of the President's veto; this week or next?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think it will be this week because we don't know when he is going to veto. We sent it down to him. We will see how quickly he vetoes. Maybe next week, maybe the week after. But we are certainly going to have an override vote.

Q Is there a time limit?

Mr. Hoyer. No, there is no time limit. The President has a time limit of 10 days, as you know, but we can take as long as we want.

Thank you very much.

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