

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,

STENY H. HOYER

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Tuesday, November 6, 2007

11:05 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. The floor schedule is that, today, we are going to vote to override the President's WRDA veto, and we'll also consider this evening the Labor-Health MilCon Appropriations Conference Report. The reason we're doing it later this evening is because we are giving the 24-hour notice we need to do it. Probably around 8 o'clock we will do that.

Wednesday, by the way -- let me mention it. You might ask a question about it. ENDA was scheduled today. Today is election day in a number of States, and there are a number of Members who wanted to make sure they were here to vote on it, so we are going to do ENDA tomorrow as opposed to today. We will also have -- tomorrow, President Sarkozy will be addressing a joint session of Congress, and we will do the Peru Trade Agreement and ENDA tomorrow.

Thursday and Friday, we will do the Homeowners' Defense Act -- that's out of Mr. Frank's committee -- and then the AMT patch with extenders as well tomorrow.

Well, let me talk a little bit about the appropriations process. One of the things I want to say is, I hope all of you have read -- did we hand it out to everybody? -- Mr. Obey's speech to the Press Club. I think it is a good primer for all of us. So, you understand, I handed it out to all of the chairmen this morning in this room when we met

with the chairmen, and I'm urging -- and I'm sending it to every Member, and the reason I'm doing that -- on the Democratic side. The reason I say that is because, for the next 4 weeks or 5 weeks, we are going to be in this discussion about appropriations, priorities, investments, and I think this will give all of us -- I know I found it very useful, and I think you will find it very useful.

Obey is, of course, very, very good, in any event, but I think it really goes through setting forth what our priorities are vis-a-vis the President's priorities. That's what politics, in the best sense, is all about: arguing about the priorities of our country, where we ought to invest our money and the trade-offs that occur in making those decisions. So I would urge all of you to read his speech because it's crammed full of facts that I think you can also use in your stories or writing or analyses or in drawing on your opinions as to who's right, who's wrong, who's making it up and who's not.

We are putting forward, with respect to the Labor-Health bill tonight, that which funds what we believe is the country's healthcare, medical research, education and veterans' priorities. We think both of these bills that we will package together are excellent bills. If you read Mr. Obey's speech, you will see that Republicans in a number of Congresses over the last 6 years never passed a MilCon

bill, or if they passed a MilCon bill with veterans' in it or when it was in the VA HUD bill, they packaged it. So this is not a unique procedure, notwithstanding some of the hand wringing you will hear.

This is \$10 billion above the President's, which is 1 month's spending in Iraq. The opportunities lost by the expenditures in Iraq are substantial. MilCon, the veterans' health, is \$4 billion above the President's. That's less than 2 weeks' spending in Iraq. In contrast, the President would cut the following key investments -- and again, you will get this in Obey's speech -- all student aid, except work study and Pell Grants. If America is going to be competitive, we will facilitate young people with talent and the willingness to work to go to school. Education for handicapped kids the President wants to cut by \$300 million. Physician training at children's hospitals he wants to cut by 63 percent; rural health programs by 54 percent; low-income heating assistance programs by 18 percent; and he essentially does not support the \$4 billion we added into the veterans' healthcare. He didn't ask for it. He says he'll sign it because politically he knows the country wants it signed.

Fifty-three Republicans supported the Labor Health bill. Over 400 Members of Congress supported the MilCon-VA bill. So these are bills that we packaged together that

have overwhelming support in the House of Representatives. There is no reason why they should not both be signed. Republicans, in my opinion, have no leg to stand on in this -- either on the process grounds or on the substantive priorities ground. That doesn't mean they will not continue to make these contentions, but as I said, last year, they didn't pass the nondefense bills so that we had to do that in the early part of this year.

During the 12 years in control, they sent 56 appropriations bills to the President as part of a consolidated bill, 56 appropriations bills. Now, they had 11, so in 6 years, that's 66 bills. Actually, I think they reduced it to 11 probably halfway through that, so it may have been 70 bills, but 56 of their bills were sent in packaged products. Last year, the GOP neglected to send any MilCon bill to the President. Again, we had to take care of that when we came here. Only once in the past 5 years did Republicans pass a free-standing military construction bill, three times that was tied to other bills. One time, they didn't pass anything. We did a CR omnibus.

Democrats on more than one occasion asked the administration to sit down and negotiate. Mr. Obey, in his speech, in his press release. I've talked to Josh Bolten. Mr. Obey has talked to Mr. Nussle. I don't know whether he has talked to Josh Bolten or not and said, look, these are

appropriations bills. We have differences. Let's sit down at the table and figure out what you need and what we need and see if we can reach accommodation. Again, I keep quoting Mr. Obey. That's what adults do. That's what an effective Congress ought to do. That's what the American public expects us to do. As I've pointed out to you, the differences between the President and ourselves on these bills is, relatively speaking, in the context of a \$3 trillion budget, very small, but in terms of the ramifications as it relates to education for our people, healthcare for our people, assistance in rural areas, basic biomedical research, safety at our borders and on our streets, the implications and ramifications are significant.

Lastly, on the AMT, we will be doing -- actually, that's not lastly.

As to the AMT, this week, Democrats will move a middle class tax relief bill. I don't know whether you have these statistics, but if not, we ought to give them to you. It protects 23 million middle class -- oh, you do have it in this document. You are so helpful. Thank you very much. It's in this document.

Twenty-three million middle class families are protected from the AMT, the Alternative Minimum Tax; 30 million homeowners can deduct their property taxes. It benefits 12 million children by expanding the child

tax credit. It benefits 11 million families from State and local sales tax deductions. It helps 4.5 million families better afford college with tuition deductions. It saves 3.4 million teachers' money with a deduction for classroom expenses. As the husband for 36 years of an extraordinary teacher, we regularly bought stuff for the classroom. We didn't resent that. We had the ability to do it, and we were glad to do it, but there are a lot of teachers who need that stuff and who put in their own dollars, and it's a business expense, teaching our kids, and we ought to give them a deduction. It provides thousands of troops in combat with tax relief under the AITC so that their combat pay does not disqualify them from the Earned Income Tax Credit while we put them at risk.

Now, we pay for it by closing tax loopholes that allow the privileged few to pay a lower tax rate than others. It stops CEOs and hedge fund managers from escaping income taxes that their secretaries and assistants have to pay. It's fully paid for by cracking down on special interest tax breaks, offshore in particular, and it stops the Republican practice of passing AMT bills paid for with borrowed money. Every year that -- they have fixed this year by year, and then they count the last 9 years as income in their budgets. The first year they provide for.

I personally believe, as you know, that we ought to fix

the AMT permanently, and we ought to pay for it. I support Mr. Rangel's proposal to do that. We believe this bill is fair. It saves millions and millions and millions of taxpayers' money, and it provides for a fair system of taxation.

Lastly, on SCHIP, Children's Health Insurance, this, as you know, is one of Democrats' high priorities. We believe, as the President said in 2004, that we ought to include millions of children who are eligible for the SCHIP Program, but for those who are not included for lack of funding or for lack of outreach, they ought to be included. Myself, others and our staffs have spent literally, combined, hundreds of hours over the last month trying to reach agreement with our Republican colleagues on adding the 10 million children -- on adding the 4 million to the 6 million children. We are hopeful that we can get to an agreement. We understand that there are a number of leaders who have told us they are not going to support -- philosophically, they are not for this bill. We understand there is a large number, but I believe that there are, in fact, sufficient numbers, if they are allowed to vote, to pass the addition of 10 million children -- or the addition 4 million -- to provide for the health insurance for 10 million children in the House of Representatives. We know that's the case in the Senate. If you saw the Senate

vote, essentially, there were 69 votes because there were five Members who were for SCHIP. There were 64 votes who voted, but there were five, six or seven members absent, five of whom voted for the SCHIP Program. So there are well over enough in the Senate, and I believe there are two-thirds votes present in the House if they are free to vote. So we are going to be working very hard today and this evening to see if we can get to an agreement. As you know, the bill passed the Senate. It's now pending. We have to send it to the President. Our preference is to reach an accommodation so that we can have a bill which does, in fact, add 10 million children to the Children's Health Program as the President said he wanted to do.

Thank you.

Q Mr. Hoyer.

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q As you know, Senate rules have been changed so that the package you drew up in appropriations isn't as easy to do, and the Republicans are going to cleave the bill in half again in the Senate. So a couple of things.

What are you going to do about getting the veterans' bill done by Veterans' Day? How are you going to do that? Are you going to stop using the presentment process or the conference process to package bills in ways that make Republicans and the White House uncomfortable?

Mr. Hoyer. I want a little clarification on the second issue.

I do understand the rules have been modified in the Senate. I do understand Senator McConnell, apparently, has represented to Senator Reid that they are highly offended by this process that they pursued on an almost two-thirds basis during the time they were in charge. They are offended only when we do it. Apparently, it didn't offend them when they did it. The reason it offends them is because politically it makes it difficult for them. I'm not very sympathetic to that problem. We want to get this legislation through. There is no doubt the President would sign the MilCon bill. What they don't want to do is have him have to veto a package, which is, of course, what they presented to him all the time, and he took the good with the bad from his perspective. We think it's -- personally, we think our package is the good and the good. As I told you, it got over 280 votes when it passed the House of Representatives, the Labor/Health bill. It got over 78 votes -- I don't have it, 75; 29 were Republicans. The majority of the Republicans voted for the Labor/Health bill. Now, there wasn't a majority here, but it was very significant. We got over 280 votes here.

These are not narrow, partisan bills that we have packaged together. There are two bills that we believe

reflect the priorities of the American public. Rules change. McConnell has the clout to undermine that process. We think that's unfortunate. We think it is bad for veterans, bad for kids, bad for families, bad for healthcare, bad for education. Having said that, if they send the Labor Health bill back alone, we will try to move that to the President. We think we can do that. We then think we'll take care of, as well, making sure that before we leave here for Veterans' Day that we'll do some funding for the veterans.

Q Will it be added to the CR? How long will the CR last?

Mr. Hoyer. That's certainly an opportunity.

How long will the CR last? I think the CR will last through the 14th of December. I said, "I think." I don't want it definitively said to Mr. Obey that Hoyer said it will be that way. Mr. Obey is the boss of that, but I think that's what we've agreed to do.

Q Are you going to override the current SCHIP if the President vetoes it? Will --

Mr. Hoyer. Let's do one at a time.

Q They're easy questions.

Mr. Hoyer. I've got you.

The first question was, will we override the veto? Well, we don't have a veto. You're talking about WERTA?

Q No.

Mr. Hoyer. SCHIP?

Q Yes.

Mr. Hoyer. We don't have a veto. You know, we tried the first one. We came up short. We only got 265. We lost one Republican and picked up a couple of Democrats -- one Democrat, I guess -- so we stayed at 265. We haven't presented him with a bill yet.

I want to stress again that I and my staff, the Speaker's staff, Mr. Dingell's staff, Mr. Rangel's staff, have all -- Mr. Grassley's staff, and Mr. Hatch's staff have been working very, very hard with a group of Republicans, House Members, who very definitely, in my opinion, want to vote for this bill, and we've been trying to reach agreement on what we believe are accommodations which will not undermine in any way the objective that we've clearly stated, and that is 10 million new children -- or 10 million children being covered under the Children's Health Program. Okay.

Secondly, your question was, with respect to ENDA and the Baldwin amendment -- what was the question?

Q Well, is it going to get a vote?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, that will be up to Tammy Baldwin.

Q It's up to you guys.

Mr. Hoyer. No. I think -- has the rule been passed

out yet?

Ms. Bernards. I believe so, yes.

Mr. Hoyer. I think the rule gives Ms. Baldwin the option.

Q Do you believe that Representative Obey was correct when he said that the President should have followed the Baker-Hamilton Commission instead of General Petraeus' recommendation? Second, what do you attribute the decrease in casualties in Iraq to?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, first of all, with respect to Baker-Hamilton, I think all of us -- many of us urged the President to pursue Baker-Hamilton, particularly the diplomatic surge. Baker-Hamilton, of course, included a reference to perhaps a temporary surge, but I think had they followed the Baker-Hamilton -- which at the bottom, Baker-Hamilton's premise was that it was time for the Iraqis to take responsibility for security and for political reconciliation in Iraq and that the longer we stayed there, our presence in effect precluded the taking of responsibility by the Iraqis, whether it's Shi'a, Sunni or Kurds. To that extent, I agree with Mr. Obey, I think.

Now, your second question?

Q The decline in casualties.

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

As to the second question, I think it's a very positive

sign. For those of you who have been in my pen and pads, as I referenced to you, I was irrelevant. That is, I was the Minority Whip. You will recall for 4 years plus, actually, for all of the years that we've been in this war, I have been very, very, very critical of the failure of this administration and of Secretary Rumsfeld to deploy sufficient numbers of troops to accomplish the mission that was set forth. I think it was a disastrous mistake. General Sanchez refers to it as "incompetence." I agree with that.

I am not surprised, therefore, when we send 20,000 additional troops and put them in an area of conflict that those 20,000 troops from the best army in the world, from the best trained and best equipped army in the world, that it brings heightened security. What they have not brought is the objective that General Petraeus, Ambassador Crocker and others have said was the objective, which was not only to bring some degree of stability and a decrease in violence. They've done that. God bless them. I'm not surprised that they did it. That's why, for 5 years, I talked about doing much more than that to accomplish the mission. What they have not accomplished is the political reconciliation, the environment in which a political reconciliation has occurred.

Q Mr. Leader, on the WRDA bill today, we've had these

threats of vetoes. We've had vetoes of SCHIP.

Do you think this helps your cause with the President in any way -- this is probably going to be overridden overwhelmingly here, and it will probably be the same case in the Senate -- to possibly, you know, break the ice with some Republicans on other issues and that you might be able to override other potential bills?

Mr. Hoyer. I hope the answer to that is yes. Let me tell you why. You have heard me talk about a complacent, complicit Congress and no vetoes. It is my premise that what the last 6 years was, was a Congress that, frankly, was controlled by the administration to the extent that they did not want to send the administration any legislation that the administration would feel constrained to veto. So, if the administration said to the Congress, "I don't like this," we gave up, in effect, our role as an independent, separate branch of government.

WRDA, we believe, has not passed in 7 years. WRDA, we believe -- Water Resources Development -- is critically important for health, is critically important for economic development and is critically important for the safety of our communities. We believe that that's why it was overwhelmingly passed in both the House and the Senate, and I think that we are going to exercise our independent, Constitutional responsibility today and say, notwithstanding

the President's views, the policy makers elected by the people think this ought to go into effect. Now, I hope -- because I answered your question initially. I said, yes. I hope that that will start a pattern where the Congress will exercise its best judgment. Again, let me remind you that the bills we've been talking about have passed overwhelmingly through both Houses.

Q Mr. Leader, can you unpack and crystallize your war spending strategy, when you will put out a bill with policy changing language? Will it be this year? Have you made decisions on that?

Mr. Hoyer. I think you're going to see policy changing language as soon as this week.

Q And what would be the format, the form on that?

Mr. Hoyer. Congressman Obey and Senator Byrd and Congressmen Skelton and Murtha and Congressman Levin are working on that as we speak.

Q Just the redeployment within the area, Mr. Leader?

Mr. Hoyer. I think that's certainly the nub of it. You know, the change of policy that we have argued for is, obviously, to redeploy our troops, to get them out of harm's way, to withdraw most of them, and to leave enough there that we can protect our embassy and our personnel, et cetera, et cetera, you know, and to give a time frame in which we think that can be done.

As you know, we passed Abercrombie-Tanner with 360 or 370 votes overwhelmingly -- Republicans and Democrats -- for a plan for redeployment. That has to passed the Senate. We don't have a plan for redeployment. We presume that the Defense Department, hopefully and responsibly, has such a plan, but we will be reiterating our desire to have that happen.

Q If that's vetoed, do you expect the ball will just be pushed forward and that there will be enough money in the pipeline?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes. We cannot simply devise all of our policies here as to what the President will or will not veto or we would, as I have said was done in the past, give up our role as a separate and equal branch of the Government of the United States. Policymakers here need to make policy. As to the President, if he disagrees, he disagrees. Then we'll have to override his veto or submit to his veto.

Q Congressman Kucinich says he is bringing a privileged resolution on impeachment to the floor this week. I wanted to get your position as leadership on the issue and why you have that position. Also, what do you expect will happen with Congressman Kucinich's privileged resolution?

Mr. Hoyer. I believe his resolution will be tabled at the time it comes up. As the Majority Leader, I will make that motion. The Speaker and I have both said that

impeachment is not on our agenda. That does not make a judgment on that issue.

What it does make a judgment on is this administration has approximately 12 months to 14 months to go. We have very important issues that we are focusing on -- the change of policy in Iraq, children's healthcare, energy independence, educational access, investing in healthcare, securing our borders and our ports. We have some major priorities. We believe that we need to pursue those policies and focus on those policies. Again, without making a judgment, we have indicated that impeachment of either the Vice President or of the President is not going to be on our agenda.

Ms. Bernards. Last question.

Q Starting yesterday, according to the IRS, every day that Congress delays in pushing an AMT patch means the filing season will likely be delayed a day. They have got a 10-week lag time. One, should you all have started acting sooner on getting the AMT patch done? Two, is there any chance of getting the AMT patch done before you break on November 16th?

Mr. Hoyer. We are going to pass it. I expect to pass it this week, as I told you, on Friday.

Q Pass it to the White House?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I mean, I don't want to speak for the

Senate. The issue is over paying for it, as you know. The White House doesn't want to pay for it. The White House and some Members of the Senate want to fix the AMT costs, approximately \$1 trillion, a little less than \$1 trillion, and not pay for it but borrow it, which means that those who are relatively better off in America and who would have not paid taxes would have borrowed \$1 trillion and their children and grandchildren would have paid that debt off with interest.

I think that is a bankrupt policy and an immoral policy, frankly, which is why we have adopted PAYGO. We haven't left it once in the 10 months that we have adopted it. We have paid for everything -- 80 percent with cuts in spending -- and we hope that the Senate will pay for the AMT. There may be disputes on how you pay for it. We are not locked in stone on how to pay for it, but it needs to be paid for, and we are hopeful that we can pass it before we leave here on the 16th.

Ms. Bernards. Thank you.

Q In terms of timing, though, shouldn't you guys have had this debate a long time ago so as not to put this filing season at risk?

Mr. Hoyer. It's always good to say that we should have done something yesterday, but it's never too late to do the right thing.

[Whereupon, at 11:35 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]