

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, April 24, 2007

11:31 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning. Well, everybody enjoy the correspondents dinner, that was there? Were any of you there? All of you there? Some of you there? You were there.

Today we meet at 10:30. We are in already. Twelve for legislative business. We have two science bills on the Floor. These are part of the effort to move an Innovation Agenda which will make us more competitive. These arise out of the National Science Foundation Report, headed up by Mr. Augustine, referring to the gathering storm and trying to meet the opportunities we have for math and science teachers as well as new researchers.

Wednesday we will meet and consider several bills under suspension. In addition, we will consider a bill to authorize four new long-term loan programs from SBA 7(a) program, again, another effort to pursue innovation, job creation and new opportunities. On Wednesday, we will also consider the supplemental conference report.

On Thursday, we will meet to consider a bill that we passed last year that deals with the slaughtering of horses and burros and return to what was the law prior to its change in 1971.

We will have no votes on Friday, at least none are expected.

Let me start by speaking of Congresswoman Juanita Millender-McDonald. She was a good friend of mine. As you know, she chaired the House administration committee. We worked very closely together in that capacity. I mentioned on the Floor today that she was someone who went back to college and received her degree at age 40 and then her further degree at the age of 47. I am not sure which date that was. But in any event, she will be missed. She was a fighter for equal rights. She was a fighter for voting rights and voter participation. She spoke eloquently and forcefully and regularly on the issues regarding Darfur as well as other abuses of human rights around the world, particularly in Africa but around the world. And she will be missed.

I want to extend my condolences as we have over the last few days to her husband James and to her children and grandchildren. It is my understanding she had five children and five grandchildren. As you know, her illness came on very quickly. I am not sure of the diagnosis, but when she got ill, it was a very short period of time. I called out there and talked to her family.

I know all of us feel badly for her family. To lose somebody, it's tough. But to lose them in that short a time frame is even tougher.

I mentioned the Innovation Agenda. We will have the

10,000 Teachers Act, Sewing the Seeds Act, which is the researchers and small business. If you want to go further into that, we will.

We are also going to consider for the global days for Darfur, a bill that deals with the Arab states acknowledging the existence of the genocide and to step up their efforts to stop it. One of the things we did was meet with, as I told you last week, President Mubarak and urged him to take such action as he could. In addition, we urged him to take action to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid.

I sent a letter yesterday to state minister al-Wasila, I signed it last night, but we sent it technically this morning. Thank you for saving me from that misrepresentation to these distinguished reporters. But in any event, I signed it yesterday; we sent it this morning. Essentially what we said is, we met with him and we asked him to facilitate both visas and travel documents. The Bashir government has not been cooperative in any of the aspects of either stopping or ameliorating the results of the violence that has occurred in Darfur.

With respect to the move now to the supplemental, the supplemental, we are hopeful that we will get a good vote on that Wednesday. The Senate will then consider it on Thursday. We obviously have to do paperwork. That may slow us down a little bit. But we hope to get the conference

report to the President on Monday.

We are very hopeful that the President will sign this bill. It includes all of the money he asked for for the troops, plus some. It includes additional moneys in Afghanistan where, as I have said before, we feel the most pointed fight against terrorism is occurring. The Taliban is feared to be resurgent. We believe that the President is right: We need to fight terrorism, stop terrorism, protect our country. And so we provided him with additional resources.

In addition to that, as I have told you, although there is obviously disagreement from the administration, I don't think we do anything to undermine the judgment or in any way substitute our judgment for the judgment of the commanders on the ground as to how they can use the troops to attain success. I think all of us hope for success, and we don't do anything to undermine that.

There is, as you know, a goal. We adopted the Senate's goal rather than deadline. Although, given performance on the ground, we do require that we start withdrawal proceedings soon.

That bill I think is one on which we can reach consensus; it is one which I think the overwhelming majority of the American people support; conservatives, moderates, liberals, across the political spectrum. We see this effort

as not succeeding. We saw yesterday the tragic loss of nine lives, American men and women in uniform -- I don't know whether any were women, but members of the Armed Forces lost their lives yesterday. I have observed we have lost about 3,300 people; 10 percent of those have been lost in the last 4 months.

So we believe that the American public expects us to try and move in a new direction; expects us to set benchmarks for the Maliki government to perform; and the absence of that is that the political solution, which General Petraeus will be talking to us tomorrow, General Petraeus says it has got to be a political solution not a military solution. And General Petraeus is observing, and Secretary Gates, I hope all of you saw Secretary Gates' comments which indicated he thought the debate here was helpful. Why is it helpful? Because it is a message to the Maliki government that the United States does not have an open-ended commitment and that the failure of the Iraqis to meet their own responsibilities and to do what they say they are going to do to bring security and stability to their country will result in an earlier departure by the United States.

Questions?

Q Mr. Leader, with all due respect, are you expected --

A Bad way to start.

Q I know. Not 15 minutes ago, the President just said he was disappointed with what the congressional Democrats have done with this bill; he is not going to sign it; he doesn't wasn't anything with timetables. Are you expecting some kind of overnight conversion? You say you are hopeful that he's going to sign this.

A We would hope that he would have an overnight conversion. We are not expecting an overnight conversion. The President and the Congress disagree. The President disagrees with the overwhelming majority of the American public. He continues to substitute his judgment, his personal judgment for the judgment of many others.

When I said that Secretary Gates, his appointee, just recent appointee, was in Iraq and indicated, A, that our commitment was not unending, the President will not say that to the Iraqi government. His posture is we are going to stay the course. Stay the course and losing the kinds of people that we are without accomplishing the objective is not one that we think makes sense.

Now we'll send this bill down. He will do with it what he will do. If he vetoes it, I have observed publicly we don't have the votes to override the veto. But I will tell you this, that my intuition, not conversations or whip counting or anything, my intuition tells me there are an

awful lot of members of the President's party who have great concerns about simply staying the course and simply pretending that we do not need to change the course in light of what's happening on the ground.

Q Mr. Leader, what's the plan on the budget? And what is proving harder to resolve, the 2008 discretionary or the tax number?

A Well, I said last week, the good news from my perspective is that we have two of the Congress's most outstanding, commonsense, thoughtful hardworking members in Mr. Spratt and Mr. Conrad. These are people of real substance who want to get something done substantively, not politically. So we have two of our best people working on this issue. They are talking about it, trying to get to where we need to get. Obviously, one of the problems, as you know, is the Baucus amendment, \$180 billion tax cut paid for by speculative -- I hope they occur; we plan on them occurring -- surpluses. But that and a number of other items are still open to discussion.

I'm hopeful those discussions will bear fruit in the short term, and they can figure out how to get the votes on the House and the Senate to pass a budget. It is my intention and Mr. Obey's intention to move ahead on the appropriation bills mid-May. We'll start the appropriations process, and we hope to finish it by the end of June before

we leave for the July 4th break.

To keep on track for that schedule, we are going to have to, if the budget cannot be resolved, perhaps go to a deeming of the numbers that were passed in the House for purposes of the 302(a) allocations to the House committee.

Q One, would you stick with the House budget numbers? And, two, any chance of appointing conferees this week?

A I think there is a chance. I don't want to say that we're going to do that. First of all, that's the Speaker's judgment, but certainly we'll confer about that. I think if she thought that we were able to do that successfully, we would do it. I certainly don't want to say that's going to happen.

Q Iraq had a delicate balance on the last vote. What do you think are the chances that this might go to conference in the middle of the month?

A My view is that those who voted for the last report, while this is different in certainly some respects, the most important of which is the goal as opposed to the deadline for withdrawal; in other words, the goal of "getting out by" as opposed to "get out by." That's a change. Some will see it as a lessening of the requirement.

I think that the people who voted for it last time will see this as continuing to suggest a change in our policy, a change in direction, a new direction, and I think we expect

them to vote for it.

Q Mr. Leader, Mr. Boehner said this morning he would be open to legislation that would assign benchmarks and perhaps even tie U.S. aid to those benchmarks that the Iraq government must meet, and President Bush said he would be open to negotiating that with Democrats. Why didn't you pursue that tack from the very beginning? And would you consider it now after the President vetoes this bill?

A You're asking me, would I consider that? And the answer is, yes, I would consider that. I think we will consider it. We want to see the troops supported. There is a difference of opinion as to what we ought to do on the Iraq policy, but there is no disagreement on supporting the troops. We have people in harm's way. We want to support them, and we will support them.

I think Mr. Boehner -- I did not hear Mr. Boehner. I haven't talked to him about that specifically. Mr. Boehner's posture has been in the past that victory, without defining victory, is the only option. We all want to see success. Reaching that success, obviously, has been difficult and as of this date has not occurred.

But the answer to your question is, I think, responsibly, if the President vetoes this, and we would hope he would not, whether it's a Damascus Road experience or not in the next 24 hours, as you suggest, we would hope he would

sign this -- not 24 hours, it's going to be 96 or 120 hours between now and Monday or Tuesday of next week, which is when I think he will take the action.

We would hope he would sign it because we believe it funds the troops, does not impede moving ahead on success. It does suggest telling the Maliki government and, with a goal of withdrawing our troops, it still maintains the language that says our troops can protect our diplomatic interests, can protect other troops, can go after al Qaeda and terrorists and can transit to a training mission pursuant to the Baker-Hamilton -- not pursuant to, but like the Baker-Hamilton suggestion.

But I think when and if a veto occurs, we are going to have to talk about how we move forward. As I said at the White House, we can't pass a bill over the President's veto, and the President can't pass a bill without our support. So we need to talk.

Q Sir, on gasoline prices, some analysts have said that gas could reach \$4 a gallon this year. Is the House and Senate engaged in some sort of coordinated effort to fast track an energy bill if consumers get hit that hard at the pumps?

A The answer is, the House and the Senate are discussing energy generally, energy independence specifically. And this matter, of course the Bart Stupak

bill that was considered last year, he is working on that, the committee is working on that. As you know, the Speaker has indicated she wants energy legislation on the Floor the end of June. Whether we get specific, we want to do the appropriation bill, so whether or not we can do that or do it in July, we are going to do it within a short time frame.

We are very, very sensitive to the price of gas at the pump. As someone who represents a suburban district that it takes me an hour and a half in the morning, I have an apartment here, but most of my constituents don't have that ability to have a second residence, or they have family at home. I used to go home before Judy died.

But now if I stay at home, it takes me an hour and a half, hour and 45 minutes, sometimes as long as 2 hours. That's a lot of time on the road and a very expensive proposition.

We are very, very concerned about the impact it's having on our working public, and we're going to address that.

Q Did you say you're going to meet with General Petraeus?

A I didn't say I was meeting with General Petraeus.

Q I was asking, is there a meeting?

A Oh, is there a separate meeting beyond the briefing? There's a briefing tomorrow at 2:30. David, I don't know of

a separate meeting that we have scheduled with General Petraeus. There may be with the Speaker and/or Skelton and Murtha. I don't have a specific meeting set up with him, nor have I been invited to one at this point in time beyond the briefing at 2:30.

Q Mr. Leader, I know that Democrats are continuing to stay hopeful, and of course, President Bush hasn't vetoed yet, or we're hopeful that he won't, but at what point do you put your foot down and say, you know what, if you don't come to an end with this, we are going to use the power of the purse to bring our troops home? At what point do Democrats put their foot down?

A I think Democrats have put their foot down. Democrats have made it very clear that they believe we need a change in direction, a change in our policy, and we passed a bill through the House that said that; through the Senate that said that; we're going to pass a conference report that says that. We're going to send it down to the President. That's the legislative process. The President has said he's going to do this, going to do that, but he's going to be confronted with a bill that totally funds the troop effort that he is about, totally funds it; does not impede the flexibility of the commanders on the ground to do with the troops what they believe to be, as I have said, best designed for success.

We're hopeful that in that context he would sign it. But he said he's not going to sign it. We will then, as soon as he vetoes, have to look at what our alternatives are. You would think I was very foolish if I represent that we haven't yet thought about what the alternatives. Are, of course we have, but we need to wait until he does what he says he's going to do. But we believe the American public, in every poll we've seen over the last 3 or 4 weeks, is supportive of what we have suggested. We believe that over 70 percent of the American public believes that what we've suggested makes sense in terms of the benchmarks, in terms of training, equipping, in-theater time, in-home time, training time for our troops. All of that the American public thinks makes sense. We would hope the President would change his mind. If he doesn't, we'll have to go from there, as I said.

Q Sir, what are you going to do to make sure Dennis Kucinich's articles on impeachment never see the light of day?

A That, of course, is in Mr. Conyers' committee and Mr. Conyers --

Q Can you stop it?

A Some time ago Speaker Pelosi indicated that what we need to do is focus on the substance of the issues at hand, and that's what we're going to do. That's as far as I'm

going to go.

Q No Child Left Behind, the President is speaking on it today. Do you have any sense of reauthorization, what it will or will not look like?

A I don't want to anticipate what it will or will not look like at this early date. Chairman Miller and I have discussed No Child Left Behind. Chairman Miller and I have agreed in the past that the accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind are positive. We've also agreed, and Speaker Pelosi and I and Mr. Miller have all discussed it together with other leaders in the room that we need to address some of the concerns raised by all the States. There currently is a particular discussion between one of the States and the Department of Education.

But I think that Mr. Miller is committed to moving ahead on reauthorizing No Child Left Behind, but I'm sure there are going to be considerations of the problems raised with respect to those who are tested; that is, who was tested; how they're tested; how are schools determined to be successful or failing? There have been real concerns raised throughout the country about that. I think some are legitimate concerns, and we'll discuss those.

Q Will States still be allowed to sort of develop their own standards? You have a situation in Mississippi where there are all these blue ribbons schools but the kids

don't manage nationally.

A Again, I don't want to anticipate, when you ask me specifically, will the States be allowed? It would be premature for me to judge what Mr. Miller and his committee determine is necessary to do. I think, suffice it to say, that Mr. Miller feels this is a very important piece of legislation, was very involved in it. As we know, at the initial stages, President Bush was very much for it. We, as you know, have been critical of the administration under funding the assistance to the States to reach the goals particularly in terms of certified, qualified teachers that are required in that bill. But I wouldn't want to anticipate specifics at this point in time.

Q Mr. Leader, as recently as this morning, Mr. Murtha said the surge has failed, past tense, and when asked about charges that Congress is trying to micromanage the war, he said that's our job to micromanage the war. Do you agree with either of those statements?

A Well, I didn't hear him make those statements, and I'm sure you quoted him accurately, but my view is that, as I said earlier, we are not succeeding in stabilizing and making more secure Iraq. There are pockets which I think have shown some progress, but generally speaking, of course, violence has escalated. Generally speaking, we have seen a further destabilizing; we have seen al-Sadr withdraw his six

ministers from the cabinet. He has not withdrawn his 30 votes from the government, so that the government has still got the votes. But it is certainly a situation in which the success that was hoped for has not yet occurred.

Now I will say that I have indicated that I don't believe we micromanage, and I believe that the job of the Congress is to set policy. The job of our military is to carry out that policy in a way they deem based upon their professional expertise best designed to accomplish our objectives.

Q Back to the budget, in terms of SCHIP, there are some concerns that, in this round of funding, that is basically creating another health care program that, like with Medicare and health care costs continuing to grow up, creating possibly another entitlement program that could in the long term be --

A We're not creating SCHIP in the supplemental; we're funding SCHIP. In my State and a number of other States, I think there is 17 in all, that number may not be specifically accurate, but it's in that neighborhood, number of States that are running out of money who expanded their SCHIP program. Clearly, when we have 50 million, 46 to 50 million, pick a figure, Americans uninsured, and a significant number of those are children, we are very, very concerned about insuring children as well as their parents,

but children's access to health care through a primary care physician so that moms and dads, parents are not required, when their child gets sick, to either wait some period of time until they get much sicker and take them to the emergency room, or take them to the emergency room for what is essentially non-emergency diagnosis and treatment.

So we believe the expansion of funding, this is not the creation of a program, this is funding of an existing program which we think the American public overwhelmingly supports, covering children. We need to, frankly, move to a broader system. I think there is a consensus in the Democratic party that we need universal health care coverage in a bipartisan way. Romney, Schwarzenegger, other Democratic Governors have all moved towards trying to adopt systems that provide for that. We think that's good experimentation, and we are going to be looking at it because we think every American needs to be covered under a health insurance policy in some way.

Q There's no concern in terms of, this will create obligations long term?

A The only creation of a new entitlement program over the last 6 years, as you know, has been the prescription drug program, which was the largest expansion of entitlements since Medicare was adopted in 1965. The irony is the Republicans, of course, have railed repeatedly

against entitlement programs and created the largest one in 40 years themselves.

Q Is the gun issue dissipating?

Are you going to bring a hate crime bill to the Floor, and do you expect opposition to it?

A The hate crimes bill we continue to move to the Floor soon. I don't want to put it a date on it, but soon. The hate crime bill we believe will garner a majority of the votes. I personally am very committed to the passage of the hate crimes bill. The commission of a crime based upon a discriminatory class membership is I think a particularly virulent risk in a society like ours, as diverse as ours, and therefore, saying that, if you are going after people because they're a member of a class -- obviously murder is bad period -- but it becomes particularly bad when it is not out of passion or the things you may not be able to control but because it's a class, gender, racial, nationality crime is a particularly dangerous phenomenon. That's why we think we ought to pass the hate crimes bill.

Q Is the gun issue dissipating?

A I don't know that the gun issue either is or should dissipate. Clearly Virginia Tech dramatically brought to everybody's attention, as we do periodically, and as we do frankly daily in America, that guns are dangerous and that guns are used to take people's lives. I think we're

considering legislation that Ms. McCarthy has put forward which deals with trying to make sure that, in effect, the pre-clearance of the ability to purchase a gun, that the records available to those who sell weapons is as good as we can possibly make it, as up to date as we can possibly make it. In particular, in the Virginia case, if the mental health experience of the assailant had been known, it is possible that he may not have been eligible to purchase that gun under Virginia law. But as you know, there was not a notification that would have been consistent with the law. Thank you.

Q How do you read the whole Gonzales issue and the President's continued support of him?

A Surprising and unjustified.

[Whereupon, at 12:01 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]