

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

Senate upholds Bush veto of Amtrak bill

By a margin of three votes, the Senate on June 12 upheld President Bush's veto of a measure that would have continued federal subsidies for Amtrak, the nation's passenger rail system, and expanded the government's regulatory power over railroad freight.

The prime reason for the Bush veto was that it would allow the Interstate Commerce Commission to review proposed takeovers of railroads by investors who are not in the rail business. This measure was included in order to prevent possible takeovers of portions of the country's rail network by corporate raiders, who might use the acquisition to strip the railroad of its assets and sell the real estate, thus dismantling large chunks of the nation's already severely battered rail system.

The House overrode the Bush veto on June 7 in a 294-123 vote, but the Senate vote of 64-36 on June 12 fell three votes short of the two-thirds necessary to override. Federal subsidies for Amtrak end with the current fiscal year on Sept. 30, and so Congress will now have to take new action to continue the subsidies past that date.

Super Collider funds approved

The Energy and Water Development Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, meeting behind closed doors, approved on June 7 the administration's request for the multi-billion-dollar Superconducting Super Collider as part of the Congress's first major spending bill.

Of the \$318 million approved, \$169 million was earmarked for construction. The entire measure, howev-

er, could still be affected by the budget summit negotiations between Congress and the White House.

Gonzalez begins inquiry into Panama death toll

Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.) introduced on June 11 a resolution of inquiry which demands that President Bush, within seven days of the adoption of the resolution, submit to Congress a record of all payments made "by or through the direction of the United States government or an agent of the United States" to Gen. Manuel Noriega or to U.S.-installed President Guillermo Endara, and "an accurate accounting of the number of Panamanian civilians killed during, or by virtue of, the United States' invasion of Panama."

The Gonzalez resolution requests information of "any and all contacts between any Director of the United States Central Intelligence Agency, any United States President, or any United States Vice President, at any time, and General Manuel Noriega." It also requests any information relating to activities Noriega in support of the Contras.

Bush flip-flops on porno authorization

In the face of general outrage over the financing of pornographic exhibitions by the government-financed National Endowment for the Arts, the White House has given up its efforts to prevent restrictions on NEA disbursements and has instead begun talks with members of Congress on the extent of such restrictions.

President Bush's attempts to pre-

vent restrictions on NEA disbursements were apparently partly in deference to NEA's chairman John Frohnmayer, a brother of one of President Bush's foremost supporters. The compromise with Congress would involve requiring the endowment to impose penalties on grant recipients if their work leads to a conviction on obscenity charges. Such a compromise is, however, not acceptable to conservative opponents.

"Unless there are standards that would prevent the subsidy of anti-religious and morally reprehensible art, then it's going to be defeated," said Rep. Dana Rohrbacher (R-Calif.).

The outrage over the issue has become so overwhelming, according to sources, that some House GOPers, flooded with letters from constituents after descriptions of some grants were published, have inquired whether they should organize a public effort to oust Frohnmayer.

A White House official said that Bush "would have none of that." The bill will be sent to the full Education and Labor Committee, which will then have to act on the legislation.

Flag amendment proposal clears committee

A proposed constitutional amendment to ban flag burning was voted out of the House Civil and Constitutional Rights Subcommittee on June 13, in spite of concerns by Subcommittee Chairman Rep. Don Edwards (D-Calif.) that it is a wrong-headed assault on the Bill of Rights.

The flag amendment proposal, which was floated earlier by Republicans with the support of the White House, was considered an ideal issue for Republicans to "wave" during the upcoming election campaign. Demo-

crats, expressing concern about unnecessary "tinkering" with the Bill of Rights, passed a law making flag burning illegal.

On June 12, the Supreme Court declared that law unconstitutional, thus reviving the issue of a constitutional amendment. Although the subcommittee gave its approval to the amendment and will now pass it on to the full Judiciary Committee, Edwards urged that the committee reject the amendment and instead pass a separate non-binding resolution condemning flag burning.

Republicans, facing elections in the middle of a dire economic situation for which the Bush administration bears the prime responsibility, were overjoyed that, thanks to the Supreme Court, they could now use the flag amendment for 30-second campaign ads with which to bludgeon Democrats this fall. "I'm not sure this amendment is about flag burning," said Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.). "It is about the politics of reelection, it is about the politics of hypocrisy and manipulation."

Riegle says \$50 billion more for S&L bailout

Sen. Donald Riegle (D-Mich.), chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, said that Congress may have to provide a new savings and loan bailout fund of about \$50 billion this year.

The Resolution Trust Corp., the agency responsible for the bailout, "appears to have plenty of money to meet its immediate needs," said Riegle on June 12. "But Congress will have to act, probably later this year, to provide additional funds."

Riegle noted that there was little evidence of any real progress in selling assets the government has inher-

ited from failed S&Ls. Riegle also criticized the Treasury Department for failing to provide current information on the financial condition of the thrift industry.

The Riegle estimates received corroboration a few days later when L. William Seidman, chairman of the RTC, announced that they would need an infusion of cash by the end of this year, at least six months sooner than expected. "We will be out of funds and unable to do transactions some time in the third or fourth quarter," Seidman said. "When you don't have money, you can't continue."

At the same time, the Congressional Budget Office released an estimate that as many as 1,700 savings and loans may eventually collapse, two-thirds more than previously thought. "Clearly, the savings and loan pit is becoming wider, deeper, and much more slippery as the RTC moves into its critical phase," commented House Banking Committee Chairman Rep. Henry Gonzalez (D-Tex.). "The CBO projections clearly will require the administration to drastically rethink its cost estimates."

House okays AIDS bill minus mandatory reporting

The House on June 13 approved by a 408-14 vote a bill which would give emergency relief to the cities hardest hit by AIDS. The bill would provide \$4 billion over five years to care for people with AIDS, primarily in clinics, homes, and hospitals in all states and in the 16 cities with the greatest number of AIDS cases.

An amendment by Rep. William Dannemeyer (R-Calif.) which would have required doctors and health officials to report the names of all those who test positive for the AIDS virus

so that state officials could trace their sexual partners, was rejected on a 312-113 vote after a heated debate.

The White House has opposed the bill because the President considers it too costly and because it is limited to a single disease. The Office of Management and Budget issued a statement saying that the measure would "set a dangerous precedent, inviting treatment of other diseases through similar ad hoc treatment."

The bill emphasizes "preventive services" which include testing and counseling of those who are tested, followed by early treatment of those who test positive. The House bill provides a mere \$400 million for each of the next five fiscal years to pay for preventive services. Half the money would go directly to clinics and programs in the chosen cities, and half to the states to distribute.

Appropriations committee works without guidelines

The House Appropriations Committee began work on June 13 on the first of 13 spending bills which will make up the heart of the federal government's budget for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1. This year, more than others, they are starting out on an uncertain venture.

The Congress has not yet completed work on a fiscal 1991 budget which would have set limits to spending in the various areas. At the same time, the much-touted "budget summit" between the Congress and the White House has slowed to a crawl since the two parties are so far apart. As a result, the appropriators are free to proceed without any limiting instructions.