

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

Souter confirmed for U.S. Supreme Court

The Senate voted 90-9 on Oct. 2 to confirm Judge David Souter to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The nine votes against Souter came from liberal Democrats who feared that he would vote to restrict what they considered a woman's constitutional right to have an abortion.

"I am troubled that if Judge Souter joins the current closely divided Supreme Court, he will solidify a 5-4 majority inclined to turn back the clock on the historic progress of recent decades," Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) said.

Senate Judiciary Committee chairman Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) said he voted to confirm Souter because he thinks Souter "is not the sort of man who would run roughshod over the Constitution," but conceded Souter's positions on religious freedom, racial discrimination, and abortion rights were unclear.

Campaign financing bills make good electioneering

The House and Senate passed separate bills to revise campaign financing laws during the summer, but the bodies remain sharply divided on key provisions of the legislation. It is likely that the reform will go nowhere, although congressmen can now go into the November elections claiming that they have voted to reform the campaign financing process.

At a time when Congress is considering increases in the costs to the individual of such necessary items as Medicare, it's very uncertain that voters, who are in a strong anti-Washington mood, will accept these claims.

In one disagreement, the Senate bill would ban all contributions from political action committees (PACs), while House Democrats, whose members are much more dependant on PAC contributions from labor unions and other organizations, want only a ceiling put on PAC contributions. President Bush has promised to veto the legislation, if it is passed.

The chances that the House-Senate conferees will iron out the differences in the bill are very slim. "Anyone who says the chances are good is lying to himself or someone else, but we have got to try," commented Rep. Al Swift (D-Wash.). This opinion was seconded by Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), who regards the chances of compromise as "nil."

Some legislators are aware that this is not going to go down well with the voters. "There's a real prairie fire out there," said Rep. Mike Synar (D-Okla.). "As long as people think the special interests have Congress in gridlock, they won't have confidence in anything we do. I don't know how many more wake-up calls Congress will get," he warned.

Clean Air bill delay may kill it for now

The House-Senate conference on the Clean Air bill erupted into a shouting match on Sept. 28, with both sides blaming the other for delay on the bill which threatens the chances of passing the legislation before Congress adjourns in October.

Since the negotiations began in July, conferees have resolved only a few of the least controversial issues, leaving the more divisive issues of smog, acid rain, and airborne toxics

for the final days of discussion.

The delays indicate fear among some legislators that this total surrender to the environmentalist lobby could sound the death-knell for what is left of U.S. industry, creating overwhelming costs which will accelerate the rate of bankruptcies in the economy.

Environmentalists are not happy about the delay. "I'm very distressed by the lack of progress," Sen. John H. Chafee (R-R.I.) told the conferees. "I feel what is going on here is a delaying strategy. I worry that we're going to be put in a take it or leave it position."

Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.), a spokesman for the environmentalists, said that the two sides are "still miles apart on key issues."

Senate backs consensus for Gulf deployment

The Senate voted overwhelmingly on Oct. 2 in favor of Senate Concurrent Resolution 147 which supports the present U.S. troop deployments in the Gulf.

Although it characterizes the actions simply as a "participation in collective security actions" and emphasizes that they be conducted in accordance with the U.N. resolutions, it authorizes the President "to protect American lives and vital interests in the region," a provision which could easily be used to justify military action in the wake of some alleged provocation, i.e., another "Gulf of Tonkin" go-ahead for military engagement. The resolution calls on the President to "consult with the congressional leadership" prior to committing U.S. Armed Forces to hostilities unless urgent circumstances do not permit.

The Senate has been hesitant to invoke the War Powers Act, which stipulates that the President may deploy troops if he determines that an emergency exists, but that within 60 days thereof there must be an act of Congress—which has the constitutional power to declare war—in order for the action to continue.

Some fear that the resolution will give indirect support for further escalation in the Gulf. Sens. Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.) and Mark Hatfield (R-Ore.) have called for invocation of the War Powers Resolution in response to the Gulf deployment. Congress is “the artful dodger” in its refusal to vote on invoking the War Powers Resolution, Hatfield said. Since the concurrent resolution has no force of law, Hatfield characterized it as a “press release for the Senate.” “We are the embodiment of hypocrisy. . . . We must ask questions about the Gulf without fear of our patriotism being attacked.”

Hatfield called it a “non-binding, toothless piece of craftsmanship. . . . Why avoid our responsibilities?” Hatfield said that “The Senate Foreign Relations Committee hasn’t even considered the War Powers Resolution,” although when the act was passed, everyone was pledging furtively that there would be “no more Vietnams.”

Some Republicans fear that if President Bush doesn’t compromise with Congress on the War Powers Act, the shaky “consensus” which has been established with regard to the Gulf operation will rapidly disintegrate. “There’s kind of a loose consensus,” commented Sen. William Cohen (R-Me.), “but you can see it start to fray on the edges. The longer this goes on, the more doubts that are going to be expressed: Is this really blood for oil? You mean we don’t have a democracy in Kuwait? How

about free elections and what about Saudi Arabia?” Colen warned, “People will become divided.”

A similar resolution of support approved by the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Sept. 27 stated that “the United States shall continue to emphasize the use of diplomatic and other means” to achieve its objectives. The resolution will come to the floor of the House later in October.

Funding cut for overseas military construction

The Senate on Oct. 1 approved an \$8 billion military construction bill that makes wholesale cuts in the budget for overseas projects and prohibits spending U.S. dollars on a new air base in Italy.

The Senate trimmed \$1.1 billion from the White House budget request for fiscal year 1991. The bill cuts \$151 million from the Bush budget of \$153 million for Germany, \$43 million from the request of \$44 million for Italy, and \$46 million from the budget of \$47 million for the United Kingdom.

The Senate legislation eliminates totally the \$83 million sought by the administration for projects in South Korea and all \$18 million for projects in Japan.

SDI and Stealth shot down in House

The House of Representatives voted on Sept. 19 to slash \$2.4 billion from President Bush’s request for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) and to halt production of the B-2 bomber.

Rep. William Dickinson (R-

Ala.), ranking Republican on the Armed Services Committee, said that President Bush had told him that he would veto the bill.

Overall, the bill includes cuts of \$24 billion from the administration’s request for defense in the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1. It reduces overall troop strength by 129,000, eliminates research money for the MX and Midgetman intercontinental ballistic missiles, but includes \$1 billion for assisting the military buildup in the Persian Gulf.

The House action puts it in conflict with the Senate bill which leaves the B-2 bomber request intact and reduces SDI by \$1 billion.

Greenspan blames recession on oil price

In testimony before the Joint Economic Committee on Sept. 19, Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan told legislators that the Persian Gulf crisis has piled “new and substantial risks” on an already faltering national economy.

“The oil shock has clearly increased both the probability of inflation and recession,” said Greenspan. The Fed chairman added that if crude oil prices average around \$30 per barrel over the next year, the higher prices would likely lower economic growth by a full percentage point over a year’s time while boosting the inflation rate by up to 2%.

The “beige book,” a Federal Reserve report on conditions in various parts of the country released the same day, noted that economic activity in the Federal Reserve’s 12 regions was either expanding more slowly or actually declining. “Weakness is most apparent in the Northeastern and mid-Atlantic districts,” the report said.