

## Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

### Infrastructure bill wins out over deficit politics

On April 17, the House passed "The Truth in Budgeting Act," which will take the Highway Trust Fund, the Airport and Airway Trust Fund, the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, and the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund off budget, so that these funds are not counted as part of the general fund for purposes of calculating the federal deficit. The move is an attempt to circumvent the stranglehold that the budget committees and deficit debate have gained over federal spending.

Debate rapidly turned into one of "infrastructure development versus deficit politics." The tone of the positive side of the debate was set by Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Bud Shuster (R-Pa.), who said that every \$1 billion spent on infrastructure creates 42,000 jobs. "If we spend money to build America's infrastructure," he said, "we increase productivity in America, we save lives, we stimulate economic growth."

Shuster was backed by Democrats and Republicans: William Lipinski (D-Ill.) said, "I support infrastructure investment in the United States because it spurs economic growth and creates good jobs." Jay Kim (R-Calif.) said, "I know that without a strong transportation system we cannot sustain a prosperous economy." Peter Defazio (D-Oreg.) commented, "If you spend money on a bridge, a highway, in mass transit, that money will provide economic benefits for decades to come. Yet we treat that the same as money spent for a one-time expenditure of something consumable and thrown away by the Federal government." Jack Quinn (R-N.Y.) said, "I support this legislation for many reasons, because I believe that the infrastructure of our nation is vital to our economic viability." Bob Wise (D-

W. V.) added, "The only way you grow is to invest in your country, in your stock, in your physical infrastructure—your roads, your bridges, your water systems, your sewer systems, your airports, your locks and dams, that is how you grow. It has also been documented that building infrastructure also improves productivity, another key to growth."

The opposition was totally absorbed by the deficit issue. Frank Wolf (R-Va.) trotted out letters from Conservative Revolution ideologues, from Pete du Pont to Alan Greenspan to Paul Volcker, to argue against taking the trust funds off budget. John Shadegg (R-Ariz.) complained that the bill "will make it impossible to balance the federal budget." Chris Shays (R-Conn.) called it the "pork barrel bill of 1996 because what it means is we are going to provide \$50 billion more and make it available to people who want to spend on roads and bridges." These Republicans were, unfortunately, joined by a handful of Democrats, including Ranking Budget Committee member Martin Sabo (D-Minn.) and David Obey (D-Wisc.). However, 120 Democrats joined with 163 Republicans to pass the bill.

### Support grows for higher minimum wage

Congress' return from its Easter recess saw a rising chorus of demands from Democrats for a floor vote on increasing the minimum wage. But, on April 17, after two days of debate on an immigration reform bill, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.) unexpectedly pulled the bill from the floor in order to prevent votes on amendments that would have increased the minimum wage, and separated the Social Security Trust Fund from balanced

budget considerations. Dole said that consideration of the bill couldn't continue, because "we are going to be held hostage by Social Security amendments and minimum wage amendments."

Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) pointed out that Republicans often offer nonrelevant amendments to legislation. "But everyone knows," he said, "that is not what this is all about. There are some here who do not want to deal with the issues that we are attempting to address in these amendments."

On April 18, a group of 20 House Republicans, led by Jack Quinn (R-N.Y.), announced that they will support a floor vote on increasing the minimum wage. "All of us believe that people who work a 40-hour work-week ought to earn a wage they can live on," he said.

Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) backpedaled, saying that "there should be hearings." Gingrich Republicans are looking for ways to make such a bill distasteful to its proponents by loading it up with anti-labor provisions.

### Tax limitation amendment fails

A "Tax Limitation Amendment" to the Constitution, which would require a two-thirds vote by both Houses of Congress in order to pass any measure that would increase federal revenue by more than a *de minimus* amount, failed on April 15 by a vote of 243-177. The only exception to a tax increase in the proposal put forward by House Republicans, was a two-year waiver when a declaration of war is in effect.

The argument for the bill was typified by Charles Canady (R-Fla.), who said that "under our current system, it is too easy for us to add to the already onerous tax burden Congress has

placed upon the American people.”

Sam Gibbons (D-Fla.) said that the debate was a sham. “Everybody in this chamber,” he said, “and everybody within the sound of my voice knows that what we are doing is show business, poor show business at that.”

Rep. James Moran (D-Va.) said the amendment “shows contempt for the wisdom of the Founding Fathers.” He said the Constitution “has made us the most democratic, the strongest nation on Earth, and now we want to mess around with it, with this kind of Constitutional graffiti.”

## New ‘gunboat diplomacy’ needed, says Gingrich

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) suggested “that the near future has a very high likelihood of being known as the age of terrorism,” in a speech to the David M. Abshire Colloquium on Politics, Leadership, and Values sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies on April 17. Ironically, he urged a modern-day version of “gunboat diplomacy,” the practice of the British Empire, which is behind most international terrorism today.

“What I’m also suggesting,” he said, “is that the willful use of force on a unilateral basis in order to achieve political ends, and the threat of force, is going to increase, and that as the cost of mass violence goes down, that threat potential becomes proportionally greater. So that the effect that in the 18th century would’ve required sending ships to blockade Taiwan, can, in fact, be achieved by a relatively small number of missile batteries. But the psychological intimidation is comparable to gunboat diplomacy. The capacity of a country the size of Iran to have impact around the world with a

remarkably tiny investment . . . the capacity to terrorize becomes remarkably inexpensive, and if you have a model of the rule of law on a world basis which means that you have no way to deal with these kinds of problems in a systematic, orderly way . . . a relatively weak State can engage in a form of warfare very few of us understand and for which we have no doctrine. . . .

“Unless we find a new way of organizing power,” he said, “we’re going to find ourselves in a period where relatively weak systems, including non-States, terrorist groups, religious organizations, extremists in every society, have the capacity to inflict pain and cause harm that we’re not used to dealing with.”

## Senator Grams targets Department of Energy

In the wake of the tragic death of Commerce Secretary Ron Brown on April 3, Republicans have temporarily shifted their focus away from shutting down the Commerce Department, and are now targetting the Department of Energy for elimination. Sen. Rod Grams (R-Minn.) introduced a bill on April 16 to abolish the DOE, and to transfer some of its functions to other government agencies and to privatize others.

Grams claimed that “the DOE serves no real mission.” It was created during the energy crisis of the 1970s, he said, but, ignoring the collapse of the physical economy, he claimed that “the problems the DOE was created to address never materialized.” Second, ignoring the political decision to kill programs to close the nuclear fuel cycle, Grams claimed that the DOE has failed to address its responsibility to accept and store spent nuclear fuel from power plants across the country,

despite the fact that it has spent half of the \$11 billion contributed to a nuclear waste trust fund for this purpose. Grams never once, however, criticized the environmentalist emphasis of most DOE programs. Presumably, this content would not change, no matter where many of these programs end up.

Grams’s bill would transfer defense-related nuclear activities to the Department of Defense, and many basic energy research programs to the Department of the Interior. It would also mandate the General Accounting Office to study how the national labs (besides Sandia, Lawrence Livermore, and Los Alamos, which are to be transferred to the DOD), the power marketing authorities, the civilian nuclear waste program, and the Strategic Petroleum Reserve are to be disposed of, to include consideration of privatization.

## Hatch praises ADL’s role in anti-terrorism bill

Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) praised the Anti-Defamation League, a right-wing, racist hate-group, at a press conference on April 15 on an anti-terrorism bill. He was asked to explain why it is that the ADL “and other pro-Israel groups have played an important role in bringing this legislation, when numerous Arabs and Muslim groups . . . here in America, have opposed it?”

Hatch answered that the ADL “has helped us a great deal in this bill, as have others, including some . . . from Arab countries. But one reason why the [ADL] feels so strongly about this bill is, this is an anti-terrorist bill. It’s anti-Hamas terrorism, it’s anti-Arab terrorism, it’s anti-Abu Nidal terrorism, it’s anti-Islamic terrorism. . . . So, I guess that’s the reason why the ADL supports the bill and we’re very proud to have that support.”