

Congressional Closeup by Carl J. Osgood

Bonior to UAW: GOP is harming the country

House Minority Whip David Bonior (D-Mich.), speaking at the UAW National Community Action Program Conference on April 24, urged organized workers to get more involved in the pre-election debate, by telling people in their communities that the Republicans "are doing harm to the country."

He admitted that the Democrats did a poor job in the 103rd Congress, because they failed to deliver health care reform "and some other things," but now "we're ready this time. We know what we have to do. We know how important health care is. We know how important pension portability is. We know how important the issues of wages are. We know how important it is to save Medicare and Medicaid. . . . We will stand with you and we will work together and we will fulfill our mission. . . . We think the American people are ready to listen to Democrats again."

GOP blocks vote on minimum wage rise

On April 25, House Democrats attempted to bring to the floor a bill to increase the minimum wage, by amending a resolution needed to waive certain House rules in order to expedite the consideration of the omnibus appropriations bill that was passed later that day. The move was defeated on a motion to end debate.

Scott McInnis (R-Colo.) objected to the move because it would bypass the committee process, in order to bring the bill to a vote. He also claimed that Republican plans to cut taxes would do more for low-wage workers and their families than would increasing the minimum wage. He repeated

the populist refrain that the only way to help low wage-earners is to "get government off their back."

A host of Democrats came to the floor to argue why a vote should be allowed. Frank Pallone (D-N.J.) said that Democrats were forced to use this procedure because "the Republican leadership in this Congress will not schedule the minimum wage for a vote." Gene Green (D-Tex.) pointed out that the Economic and Educational Opportunities Committee, of which he is a member, has refused to even schedule a hearing. He pointed out to McInnis that "70% of the bills on the floor this year did not go through the committee process, and yet today, they [the Republicans] are not willing to use that special exception for the working folks."

Social Security debate bogged in budget rhetoric

Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) brought to the floor on April 24 an amendment to a bill on illegal immigration, expressing the sense of the Senate that the Social Security Trust Fund should not be considered in any balanced budget legislation. Dorgan said that any future legislation designed to balance the federal budget "ought to include a firewall between Social Security trust funds and the other revenues of the federal government." Dorgan said that using the current \$71 billion surplus to aid in balancing the budget "is not honest budgeting. If we are not going to save it [for future retirees] we ought not to collect it from the workers."

Alan Simpson (R-Wyo.) retorted, "there is no Social Security trust fund" and "everyone in this chamber knows it." Simpson, a proponent of the disastrous Chilean model of priva-

tizing Social Security, warned that Social Security will go bankrupt by 2029 and "there is no way to avoid it unless you cut the benefits or raise the payroll tax." Budget Committee Chairman Pete Domenici (R-N.M.) went further: Balancing the budget "is the best thing you can do for the Social Security trust fund" because "there is no chance of success unless the American economy is growing and prospering," and therefore, "you have to balance the unified budget." Dorgan conceded the fallacy that the budget must be balanced, but added, "let us not enshrine in the Constitution a provision that we ought to take money from workers in this country, promise them we will save it in a trust fund, and then misuse it by saying it becomes part of the operating revenue of this country."

The amendment was tabled by a vote of 57-42.

Senators report on Bosnia visits

Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), who led a delegation to Bosnia that included Harry Reid (D-Nev.), and Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), who made a separate visit over the Easter recess, reported their findings to the Senate. On April 22, Hatch reported that his trip was to assess the progress of the Dayton accord, examine the role of the U.S. military deployment, and assess the issues of democracy and privatization.

Daschle described the current situation as a "cold peace" in which "we see a lot of opportunity for those who have confronted one another politically and militarily to find peaceful solutions. . . . but there is a long, long way to go." He also praised the decision to deploy U.S. troops along the border

between Macedonia and Serbia. "Were it not for those troops," he said, "there is no doubt that Macedonia, too, could have been engaged in war."

Intelligence Committee Chairman Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) also traveled to the Balkans during the Easter recess. His remarks to the Senate on April 23 centered on the War Crimes Tribunal. "I think it is very important," he said, "that, ultimately, [Serbian Chetniks] President Karadzic and General Mladic be taken into custody so they can be prosecuted at the War Crimes Tribunal."

Specter also expressed the fear that "the civil mission to rebuild the economy and infrastructure will not have made sufficient progress" before the IFOR military mission comes to an end in December. He said the message he heard in Bosnia was "there is a need for economic development to take hold" in order to maintain the peace.

Canady puts euthanasia ghouls on defensive

The House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, chaired by Rep. Charles Canady (R-Fla.), held a hearing on April 29 on whether or not so-called assisted suicide is a Constitutionally protected "right." Among the witnesses were Dr. Timothy Quill, a professor at the University of Rochester (N.Y.) School of Medicine and Dr. Samuel Klagsbrun, longtime medical consultant to the Euthanasia Educational Council. Both Quill and Klagsbrun were more concerned about care for the dying than in overcoming illnesses which are usually considered terminal. However, they were both put on the defensive by Canady.

Canady demonstrated from Quill's own writings how Quill's views degenerated, from advocating

assisted suicide "only as a last resort" for the terminally ill in 1991, to offering it to the physically disabled—even allowing physicians to perform lethal injections—in 1994. Quill responded weakly: "My current position is that this is allowable for terminally ill competent patients as a last resort when good palliative care fails."

Canady then turned to Klagsbrun and asked him why he had said, in a debate broadcast on CNN last month, that he didn't want to be associated with Jack Kevorkian. "My criteria," he said, "for participating in helping someone die includes the requirement that I get to know the patient extremely well over a long period of time. There's no emergency, in my mind, to help a patient die. It could be done thoughtfully and carefully . . . and to the best of my knowledge does not fit those criteria. . . . I want to limit this exploration to people who are terminally ill and competent."

Term limits amendment debated in the Senate

On April 22 and 23, the Senate debated, but failed to vote on, a Constitutional amendment to limit the terms of the Senate and the House to 12 years each, a central plank in the Contract with America. Co-sponsors include freshmen Senators Fred Thompson (R-Tenn.) and John Ashcroft (R-Mo.). The ideological sophistry was typified by Larry Craig (R-Id.) who claimed, "The longer members are here, they become the advocates of an ever-increasing government."

Opposition was led by Robert Byrd (D-W.V.), who has been at the forefront, since the beginning of the 104th Congress, in defending the Constitution from these Conservative Revolution assaults. He argued that

the proposed amendment says to the voter: "You are not smart enough to make a choice, so we are going to put into automatic pilot the limitation on the service of your senators or your members of the House of Representatives." Term limits would arbitrarily reduce the level of experience, weakening the Legislative branch, and leaving it "mostly dependent upon the advice of Executive branch bureaucrats, because they will have the only reservoir of in-depth knowledge around."

Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kans.) placed the amendment back on the calendar after a cloture vote narrowly failed to end the Democratic filibuster.

One more budget plan cooked up in Senate

On April 25, a bipartisan group of 22 senators, led by John Breaux (D-La.) and John Chafee (R-R.I.), announced a plan to balance the federal budget in seven years. One of the features is a freeze in discretionary spending over the seven years. Chafee said that the freeze would save \$268 billion, but that "it is unrealistic to suggest that savings can be achieved above and beyond this level." Another major feature of the plan is a reduction in the Consumer Price Index, which, Chafee said, "overstates inflation . . . so we make a modest correction." The correction is a 0.5% reduction in each of the first two years, and a 0.3% annual reduction thereafter. This it is claimed will save \$110 billion.

Other sections of the plan deal with Medicare, Medicaid, and welfare reform. The Medicare reform aims to cut costs by \$154 billion by promoting so-called managed care and slowing the rate of growth in payments to hospitals, physicians, and other service providers.