

Congressional Closeup by Carl J. Osgood

Senate asks Reno for yet another prosecutor

On March 19, the Senate passed a resolution, 55-45, calling on Attorney General Janet Reno to apply for the appointment of an independent counsel to investigate allegations of illegal fund-raising practices by the 1996 Clinton-Gore Presidential campaign and by the Democratic National Committee. The resolution was the pet project of Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.), who explained during the debate that the independent counsel statute's requirements for "credible and serious" allegations of wrongdoing have "already been met by what we already know from news reports about illegal foreign donations and the use of White House facilities for campaign fund-raising."

Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.V.) took the GOP leadership to task, pointing to the fact that the Senate had already given bipartisan support to a broad investigation by the Government Affairs Committee. Unlike that resolution, he said, "this resolution specifically targets for investigation by an independent counsel the President, the Vice-President, unnamed White House officials, and the Democratic National Committee, and it does so based on nothing more substantial than reports in the media."

Byrd accused the Republicans of seeking partisan political advantage and suggested that the Senate should "let the law work as it was intended." He added that the Senate ought to be pursuing "the mundane necessities of governing, like crafting a budget. . . . Instead, we are engaged in a feeding frenzy, like sharks that have tasted a little blood and hunger for more."

Strangely enough, the resolution is in the form of a joint resolution, which means it not only has to be approved

by the House, but it has to be signed by President Clinton in order to have the force of law.

Waters probes agencies ties to drug running

In the course of an hour-long "special orders" speech on the topic of "CIA Operations" on the floor of the House of Representatives on the evening of March 18, Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) said that she and others are running their own "parallel investigation" of U.S. intelligence community involvement in drug-trafficking, including the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

Waters noted that many people are suspicious of the investigations being conducted by the Inspectors General of the CIA and Justice Department, but "I tell them it is important that we let the process go forward; that some of us are not simply relying on these investigations. . . . Some of us are responding to the calls that we are getting with people who have information about drug trafficking and intelligence community involvement." She said that she and others have been meeting with people who have called her office and provided documents and information. "We are doing this, because we want to be able to compare what we are learning with the so-called investigations that are going on."

Although Waters previously has restricted her comments to the CIA alone, she now appears to have broadened her perspective to include other agencies. "I am very serious about wanting to know who knew what, and when did they know it, and how high

did it go, and whether or not the CIA or the DEA or the DIA or any other intelligence agency has been involved in drug trafficking." The investigation stems from revelations that the covert weapons-supply operations to the Nicaraguan Contras had given these "resistance fighters" a massive drug franchise in the United States. The covert operations which became infamous as "Iran-Contra" were run out of the White House under Vice President George Bush.

Waters reported on her recent trip to Nicaragua, during which she interviewed Enrique Miranda Jaime, who indicated his willingness to cooperate with the investigations and asked that she share his information with the investigators. Waters said that she has asked the Justice Department Inspector General to go and talk with Miranda, and to make sure nothing happens to him. "I am concerned that if we do not get to him and place him in a witness protection program so that he can make the information available to us, that we may not have him available to us sometime later on."

Waters said that she is going back to Managua at the request of some legislators "who have new information, and they are looking at some money-laundering schemes. We have identified that one of the persons now in the Nicaraguan government was connected to Danilo Blandón, and was responsible for laundering money out of Miami during the 1980s, when Mr. Danilo Blandón was trafficking in cocaine and crack cocaine in South Central Los Angeles." So, she said, "I will be going back," and there will be others going back. "This is the kind of work that must be done, because the Congressional Black Caucus of the Congress of the United States have decided that they are going to make the

eradication of drugs in our community our number-one priority.”

Much of her speech was devoted to calling for the CIA to be abolished altogether, and for its \$30 billion budget to be spent for schools and other domestic programs.

GOP pushes time for pay bill in House

On March 19, the House passed a bill that allows employers to give compensation time in lieu of overtime pay for overtime worked. Cass Ballenger (R-N.C.), waving the “family values” flag against just compensation for labor, said the bill “is designed to give hourly employees the opportunity to have more flexibility in their work schedules so that they can better meet the demands of work and family.”

Democrats rightly dubbed the bill “the paycheck reduction act.” Rep. Major Owens (D-N.Y.) called it a “revolutionary and reckless” change to the Fair Labor Standards Act “which has existed since 1938 as part of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal.” He added that the bill is unenforceable, and that existing law is often violated, as witnessed by the nearly 700,000 workers covered by settlements between 1991 and 1996, “which were necessary to get their overtime pay, because it was not being given to them.”

Freshman Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), however, went further: The bill repeals an existing economic, legal right, “that workers now possess, the right to obtain time-and-a-half for overtime work” and exchanges it for an IOU “issued by their employer to maybe give comp time in the future. . . . In this era of labor-saving technol-

ogy and falling real wages, when working families are struggling with two jobs, the 40-hour week plus overtime is already too long. We need to be discussing public policies that promote more jobs, higher wages, and a shorter work week.”

Mexican resolution passed in Senate

A rather moderate resolution on President Clinton’s certification of Mexico as cooperating in the war on drugs passed the Senate 94-5 on March 20. Unlike the House version passed the previous week, the Senate one does not overturn Clinton’s decision. Instead, it calls for the President to report to Congress by Sept. 1, on progress made by both countries in reducing the flow of drugs across their border. The resolution was the product of a negotiating team that included Senators Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), Paul Coverdell (R-Ga.), and Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Tex.) and the Clinton administration.

Feinstein said the compromise resolution is “the first step to a new and forceful partnership to fight drugs on both the supply side and the demand side, and to join with Mexico in so doing.” She said that if the resolution is ignored, it will be the “first step in a major battle next year to decertify Mexico as being noncooperative in the supply side of the cooperation that goes into retardation of drug flow into this country.”

The resolution criticizes U.S. anti-drug efforts and urges more border patrols and anti-drug education for American youth, and urges Mexico to show progress in the following areas: “Speedier investigations and prose-

cutions of Mexican drug traffickers, better extradition procedures, the end to money laundering, and greater diligence in identifying and prosecuting officials at all levels of government.” It also calls on Mexico to “simplify rules of evidence to make it easier to prosecute suspected drug criminals, eradicate more illicit crops, especially marijuana and opium, and do more to protect U.S. anti-drug agents.”

House GOP feathering committee nests

The House of Representatives was required to vote on its committee funding, because Democrats objected to funding for the Government Reform and Oversight Committee to investigate the same issues of the 1996 Presidential campaign that have hung up the Senate for the past several weeks. The funding resolution provides \$20 million to the committee, chaired by Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.), for its operations in the 105th Congress, an amount which exceeds any other House committee. The resolution also provides a \$7.9 million “reserve fund for unanticipated expenses.”

The resolution was derailed on March 20, failing a procedural vote when 11 conservatives broke ranks with the GOP leadership and criticized the budgeted amounts for committees as too high. House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) accepted a compromise during negotiations that night, with a rewritten resolution that freezes all committee funding at the levels of the 103rd Congress, except for the Government Reform and Oversight Committee, which retained its \$20 million. The compromise passed by 213-179.