

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

IRS bill passes House, thwarted in Senate

The House passed the Internal Revenue Service reform bill on Nov. 5, by a vote of 426-4. Rob Portman (R-Ohio), a co-chair of the task force that wrote the bill, said that while it isn't complete reform of the tax system, "it is a first small baby step in the right direction." In fact, any "reform" which seriously tackled IRS abuses, would have to take up the outrageous actions by the government bureaucracy against Lyndon LaRouche. No committee has officially looked into the LaRouche case.

The bill establishes an oversight board with 11 members, eight of whom are to be appointed from private life, with authority to oversee and review strategic plans, operational functions, management, and the budget of the IRS. It also gives the IRS commissioner more authority to manage the agency, and shifts the burden of proof in tax cases from the taxpayer to the IRS.

However, attempts to bring the House-passed bill up for a vote in the Senate have been thwarted by Finance Committee Chairman William V. Roth (R-Del.), whose committee held three days of hearings that put the spotlight on IRS abuses. Roth explained on Nov. 6 that the House bill "is good legislation," but "it does not address all the problems that were uncovered in the hearings." The following day, he added that "IRS reform must be complete," because the last time the IRS was reformed, in the 1950s, "within only a few years, the agency was once again whacked by abuse and misuse of authority."

Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.), who co-chaired the IRS reform task force with Portman, said, "This piece of legislation has been examined from stem to stern by an awful lot of people who are now embracing and endorsing the

legislation and saying that on behalf of the American taxpayer, this piece of legislation, this change in the law for the IRS, will make the IRS more efficient and make the taxpayers themselves more competent." Kerrey complained that rather than moving the bill, Republicans were obsessed with carrying out a \$30 million survey on how taxpayers feel about the IRS, which has been proposed by House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.).

GOP school voucher schemes stall

A bill incorporating a Republican proposal to create a national school voucher program, was defeated in the House on Nov. 4 by a vote of 228-191. Even making the program "voluntary" was not enough to get it the votes needed for passage.

In an exercise in twisted logic, supporters of the bill argued that the program is necessary to improve public schools (which suffer from lack of funding), by having them compete for students through giving parents "school choice." Frank Riggs (R-Calif.) attacked opponents for showing "contempt for the fundamental right of parents to choose, who do not believe that we need improvement through competition and choice in our education system today."

Opponents of the bill accused Republicans of paying off a political debt, and argued that it would do nothing to improve public education. William Clay (D-Mo.) said it is an attack on civil rights, because "a private school . . . has no obligation to protect [students] from discrimination on the basis of race, sex, national origin, or age." Further, the bill "does nothing to address crumbling and overcrowded schools or to improve teacher perfor-

mance for the 50 million children now attending public schools." Marge Roukema (R-N.J.) said, "This program will not be for all low-income students," and if it were, "we would be creating a new entitlement," which she couldn't believe her Republican colleagues would do. However, a companion bill, to expand charter schools, a similar attack on education, passed by a vote of 367-57 on Nov. 7.

On the Senate side, the "Education Savings Act for Public and Private Schools," previously passed by the House, failed a second cloture vote the same day as the House debate on the vouchers bill. Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.), however, vowed that the GOP "will not let up on this." Paul Coverdell (R-Ga.), the chief Senate sponsor of the bill, predicted that by February or March, the Democrats "will find themselves marching to our tune."

If the lack of funding for public schools is not addressed, that danger does exist.

Appropriations process finally nearing end

The end finally came into sight for the Fiscal Year 1998 appropriations process, in a flurry of activity just before Veterans Day. On Nov. 7, the House passed the conference report on the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education Appropriations bill by a vote of 352-65. The bill had been held up for weeks by issues that Labor-HHS Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman John Porter (R-Ill.) admitted had nothing to do with funding. Among these were the Clinton administration's pursuit of a national education testing program, which the Republicans vehemently opposed. Among things that were left in the bill

were prohibitions on Federal funding of a number of activities, including a new Teamsters election, a six-month needle-exchange program for heroin addicts, and restrictions on the funding and activities of the National Labor Relations Board. The Senate passed the bill on Nov. 8.

On Nov. 9, the Senate passed an omnibus bill to fund the District of Columbia Federal payment, Foreign Operations programs, and the Commerce, Justice, State and the Judiciary Appropriations. Many controversial riders were stripped from the District portion of the bill in order to secure its passage, including the school vouchers provision, which was passed as a separate bill. But, what remains at its core is support for the Financial Control Board's dictatorship over the D.C. government. Some \$8 million goes to "restructure the city's finances and impose some much-needed management reforms on the city and its various agencies," according to D.C. Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Lauch Faircloth (R-N.C.).

Both Houses then passed another continuing resolution, which expires on Nov. 14, to fund government functions until the appropriations bills are completed.

Hatch blocks pro-civil rights Clinton nominee

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) all but killed the nomination of California civil rights attorney Bill Lan Lee to head the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division, when he announced on Nov. 3 that he could not support Lee's nomination. During a Judiciary Committee hearing on Nov. 6, Hatch said that while he thought Lee was a "good person, his record reflects that

he is also an activist lawyer who has demonstrated a distorted view of the Constitution and the nation's civil rights laws." He said he could not "support a nominee whose record, combined with his testimony, demonstrate a decided reluctance to enforce the law as intended."

Patrick Leahy (Vt.), the ranking Democrat on the committee, responded, "You are here to bury Lee and do very little praise on the way by." He called Hatch's action "outrageous" and "divisive." Leahy also called on Hatch to allow Lee's nomination to be reported to the full Senate without recommendation.

Hatch defended his action, saying that the Judiciary Committee hasn't reported a Department of Justice nominee without a favorable recommendation since 1950. "While I don't begrudge those who strongly support a nominee and try to move a nomination forward by any means possible, our sense of responsibility to our colleagues and Senate precedent counsel us against such an extraordinary measure."

Leahy exercised his right as the ranking member to delay the committee vote for a week in order to buy some time to organize support for Lee. But Hatch, on CBS's "Face the Nation" on Nov. 9, declared, "This nomination is dead."

Bosnia withdrawal pressed by Republicans

Republican members of the House International Relations Committee spent the better part of a hearing on Nov. 7 badgering Special Representative for Implementation of the Bosnia Peace Accords Robert Gelbard, on when U.S. troops would be withdrawn from Bosnia. The Clinton administration

acted to halt the British-run Serbian war of aggression against Bosnia, and the U.S. troop presence is still necessary to prevent an outbreak of renewed hostilities.

Committee Chairman Ben Gilman (R-N.Y.) said that he believed Secretary of State Madeleine Albright "should explain why the President's initial pledge that U.S. military forces would be out of Bosnia by the end of 1996 was not met, and what this may augur for meeting the current withdrawal date of June of 1998."

Tom Campbell (R-Calif.) argued that the War Powers Act applied to the Bosnia situation, and that the Congress had a role in making the decision.

Gelbard praised the implementation of the Dayton Accords, especially progress made in the last six months in municipal elections and in the destruction of heavy weapons. "The most important development since the summer," he said, "has been the drastic decline in power of the Bosnian Serb hard-liners operating out of Pale," which he attributed to the "blatant corruption of the hard-liners" and the "consistent support of the democratic process in the Republika Srpska." However, he pointed out that "to implement fully the Dayton agreement requires a long-term effort," and that no decisions have been made yet with respect to a U.S. military presence in Bosnia after June 1998.

Gelbard had testy exchanges with Campbell and Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.) over the definition of the War Powers Act and whether U.S. troops were in imminent danger of being involved in hostilities. Gelbard reiterated that "there has been extraordinary progress," but "we shouldn't make the mistake of falling into the trap of thinking that quick solutions can solve these problems."