

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Campaign finance reform fails again

The McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform bill failed to get the needed 60 votes in the Senate to break a filibuster, for the second time in the 105th Congress. The first time, last fall, the bill succumbed because of a "poison pill" amendment by Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.), the so-called Paycheck Protection Act, which Democrats could not accept and Republican supporters of the bill knew would kill it.

The bill seeks to limit "soft money" spent on political campaigns, and to restrict issue advocacy by independent groups during an election campaign. Most Republicans oppose the bill.

This time around, Lott brought to the floor the Paycheck Protection Act as the underlying bill, which would outlaw political spending by labor unions derived from mandatory dues unless union members gave specific written permission, and the McCain-Feingold bill was brought in as a substitute amendment. Lott then used the same parliamentary maneuver as the first time around, "filling up the amendment tree" to prevent debate and force a Democratic filibuster in order to kill the McCain-Feingold bill for good.

Supporters of reform were not discouraged, however. After the bill died on Feb. 26, John McCain (R-Ariz.) vowed, "We'll continue to work. We'll try to continue to persuade eight of our colleagues, because that's the number we're short of 60 votes."

On a more useful front, Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) introduced a separate bill on Feb. 23, which he had wanted to add to the McCain-Feingold bill as an amendment, to place limits on political activity by tax-exempt organizations. Lieberman singled out Americans for Tax Reform, a neo-conservative anti-tax group led by Grover Norquist, which is close to

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.). "If independent organizations such as this are excused by the law from paying taxes because they're supposed to be serving non-partisan public interests," he said, "they should not be working cooperatively in campaigns with political parties that are inherently and clearly partisan."

Paxon retirement leaves GOP rebels in disarray

Just as it appeared that he was on the verge of announcing a campaign to unseat House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Tex.), Bill Paxon (R-N.Y.) instead announced on Feb. 25 that he would be retiring from Congress at the end of the current session. He said he would never again run for public office. Paxon's announcement set off a scramble by the dissident grouping led by Lindsay Graham (R-S.C.) to find another candidate to take on Armey.

As late as Feb. 20, Paxon reportedly was working the phones in order to generate support for his bid against Armey. The Majority Leader post would be a stepping stone to the Speaker's chair if Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) steps down in 1999 to run for President in 2000.

Further complicating the picture, Appropriations Committee Chairman Bob Livingston (R-La.), who had been planning to retire, reversed himself on Feb. 19. Gingrich had reportedly encouraged Livingston to consider running for Speaker, but after Paxon's announcement, Livingston said that he would not run against Armey. Also ruling out a run against Armey was Majority Whip Tom Delay (R-Tex.).

Paxon told a Republican Conference meeting that he had decided to retire after contemplating the effects on his family life of serving in the

House leadership for six to eight years. His district is in Buffalo, but his wife, former Rep. Susan Molinari (R-N.Y.), and daughter live in Staten Island. However, Jim Nussle (R-Iowa) told *Roll Call* that the real reason Paxon decided not to run against Armey, was because of what he learned from his phone calls. "He was smart enough to find out he did not have enough support before running," Nussle said.

Medical use of marijuana faces House condemnation

The House Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Crime passed out to the full committee on Feb. 25, a resolution condemning the so-called medical use of marijuana. The resolution, sponsored by subcommittee chairman Bill McCollum (R-Fla.), states that the House is "unequivocally opposed to legalizing marijuana for medicinal use, and urges the defeat of state initiatives which would seek to legalize marijuana for medicinal use." The resolution is intended to be the Congress's reply to the referendums in Arizona and California in 1996 that legalized medical use of marijuana and other illegal narcotics.

McCollum said during the subcommittee markup that lifting the ban on marijuana would send the public the wrong message about drug abuse. If such initiatives were allowed to stand, youth would be asking, "How harmful could it be?" "I'm of the view," he said, "that the future prospects of our young people is too important a matter for ambivalence. . . . As an elected body, we must speak out."

Opposition to the resolution was led by John Conyers (D-Mich.) and Barney Frank (D-Mass.); the latter is sponsoring his own bill to legalize medical use of marijuana.

Ironically, in 1981 and again in 1983, McCollum co-sponsored a bill to establish an office within the Department of Health and Human Services to regulate the production and distribution of marijuana for medical and research purposes. Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) was a co-sponsor of the 1981 legislation.

Senate resumes work on transportation bill

On Feb. 26, the Senate resumed work on the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act re-authorization, popularly known as ISTEA II. The six-month extension of the original 1991 ISTEA, passed last fall, expires on April 30.

The Senate bill provides \$145 billion over six years for surface transportation, and includes such features as expanding the state infrastructure bank program, more funding for transportation technology research, changes to the funding allocation formulas to guarantee states at least 90% of the Federal funds that they contribute to the highway trust fund, and \$700 million per year in transportation safety programs. The bill also makes environmentalists happy, with increased funding for bicycle paths and wetlands restoration.

However, there's still a lot of work to do on the bill before final passage. Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman John Chafee (R-R.I.) reported that some 200 amendments had been filed, not including funding and financing matters which are to be worked out "between the participants in that matter," he said. In addition, reconciliation with the House is likely to be difficult, because the House version of the bill is much larger and very different.

Clinton certification of Mexico criticized

On Feb. 26, the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a hearing to examine the process for certifying countries as cooperating with the United States in fighting drug trafficking. Subcommittee Chairman Paul Coverdell (R-Ga.) set the tone of the hearing, with his criticism of the recent Clinton administration decision to certify Mexico as a cooperating country.

Coverdell said that the situation in Mexico with respect to the activities of the Mexican drug cartels is little changed from a year ago, when the certification of Mexico sparked a campaign to destabilize the Mexican government. "I do not put the full measure of blame for this situation on the Mexican government," he said. "Our own administration has failed to treat our relationship with Mexico with the level of respect it deserves." Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.) chimed in, saying, "The decision to certify Mexico is incorrect. While we should give credit to Mexico for the limited progress it has made, there remain gaping holes in its counter-narcotics effort."

In fact, such criticisms are designed to undermine ongoing anti-drug collaboration between the Clinton and Zedillo governments, and to destabilize Mexico.

Drug Enforcement Administration head Thomas Constantine, who was the subcommittee's only witness, confirmed that the Mexican cartels are stronger than a year ago "because of the growth of methamphetamine as a drug of choice," and because "the heroin from Mexico" is now almost as pure as Colombian heroin. He said that the reason there is no intelligence sharing from Mexican authorities to U.S. authorities, is that the "civilian law enforcement institutions have become so

overpowered by these trafficking organizations. . . . All you need is two or three corrupt officers to tell the traffickers that information [which] is dangerous to you: 'Change your route of travel.' "

Democrats complain of do-nothing Congress

As they did at this time last year, House and Senate Democrats are complaining that the GOP leadership is holding up work on important bills in order to satisfy moneyed special interests. Not only did Democrats in both Houses complain about the death of the campaign finance reform bill in the Senate, but they've also been complaining about other bills being high-jacked as well, especially managed health care reform.

On Feb. 25 and 26, several House Democrats called on Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) to schedule the managed care reform bill for floor debate. Frank Pallone (D-N.J.) said that the reason the GOP doesn't want to take the bill up, is that "they are aligned with the special interests, who are spending a million dollars to kill managed care reform because they know what tremendous support the issue has with the American people."

Further, the 1998 schedule contains only 89 legislative days, according to *Roll Call*, the fewest since 1956 (when there were 119). With an agenda that includes the Fiscal Year 1999 budget bill, 13 appropriations bills, NATO expansion, the surface transportation bill, IRS reform, Social Security reform, and numerous others, the work on most of which has barely begun, there is doubt as to whether the Congress can finish its 1998 agenda before the adjournment target date of Oct. 9.