

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Budget resolution passed in House

On June 4 and 5, the House passed a budget resolution by a vote of 261-204, well after the April 15 deadline set in law. Budget Committee Chairman John Kasich (R-Ohio), the author of the resolution, claimed that all it does is cut "only" \$100 billion out of a projected \$9.1 trillion in spending over the next five years. He railed against the Clinton administration's plan, for its \$150 billion in new spending, 39 new entitlement programs, 85 new spending schemes and, in general, too much "big government." He complained that too many people in the Democratic Party "believe in running America from the top down."

Democrats pointed out that the \$100 billion in spending cuts doesn't come out of the entire budget, but rather only from a portion of it. John Spratt (D-S.C.), the ranking minority member on the Budget Committee, said that what Kasich proposed "is a budget that would unrealistically lower discretionary spending," which amounts to only about one-quarter of the budget. On top of that, the cuts don't happen this year. "We will adopt them now, and on the strength, the promise that they are going to be realized, we will do a big tax cut," said Spratt.

Another target of Democrats' complaints was the late hour of the debate, which began at 11 p.m. on June 4. David Obey (D-Wisc.) commented that the Kasich budget was only designed to get the Republicans "through the night," and that they wanted to debate "when nobody is watching because they are so embarrassed by it [that] they would not bring it to us in the light of day."

Two substitutes were voted on before the vote for final passage, one written by the Conservative Action

Team (CAT), which had the support of Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Tex.), and a Democratic substitute put forward by Spratt. The CAT's plan, which was even more radical than the Kasich plan, proposed \$150 billion in tax cuts, \$280 billion in spending cuts, and a 56% increase in defense spending over five years. It also contained a provision that 50% of budget surpluses would go to paying down the Federal debt.

Minority Whip David Bonior (D-Mich.) said the Democratic alternative would have protected the Clinton administration's priorities, including education, the environment, health care, and Social Security. The CAT plan was rejected by a vote of 158-262; the Democratic plan was voted down 164-257.

Food stamps restored for immigrants by House

On June 4, the House passed the conference report on the agricultural research bill, by a vote of 364-50. The bill had been stalled on a procedural vote on May 22, when the GOP leadership attempted to strip out a provision restoring food stamp benefits to certain categories of legal immigrants. This time, the bill was brought to the floor on a unanimous consent agreement and the Republicans tried to kill it using the unfunded mandates law of 1995.

Rules Committee Chairman Gerald Solomon (R-N.Y.) raised a point of order against the bill, arguing that because it lowers each state's reimbursement for administrative costs in the food stamp program, the result would be "to force every single senior citizen homeowner in America to pay more real estate taxes."

However, Agriculture Committee

Chairman Bob Smith (R-Ore.) pointed out that "state funds are already being used for the very purposes that we talk about here . . . regarding legal aliens' food stamps," benefits which were denied by the 1996 welfare reform bill. Charles Stenholm (D-Tex.) added that, because of the way the food stamp program interacts with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, the block grant program created by the 1996 welfare reform bill, some states are being reimbursed twice for the same administrative costs. Stenholm said that the provision Solomon was complaining about was intended to correct this problem.

Solomon's point of order required the House to vote on whether to proceed with consideration of the bill. The vote was 324-91 to proceed.

Clinton's decision on China-MFN sparks debate

President Clinton's June 3 announcement that he would be renewing China's certification under the Trade Act of 1974 (usually referred to as Most Favored Nation trading status), has kicked off the annual debate in Congress on U.S.-China policy. Clinton's decision came as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright departed for Geneva for a meeting of the permanent five members of the UN Security Council on the India-Pakistan nuclear tests. Clinton praised China for chairing this meeting. He said, "This is further evidence of the important role China can play in meeting the challenges of the 21st century and the constructive Chinese leadership that will be essential to the long-term resolutions of issues involving South Asia." He stressed the importance of engagement in dealing with issues on which

the United States disagrees with China, such as on human rights.

House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) issued a statement opposing Clinton's decision. He focused primarily on human rights, but also took a swipe at China on trade. "China is a great power with a great people, but the Chinese government cannot be rewarded for its actions," he said.

The following day, House Rules Committee Chairman Gerald Solomon (R-N.Y.) introduced a resolution to overturn Clinton's decision. In typical neo-conservative fashion, he claimed that "appeasing Communist China has failed to encourage more decent and more responsible behavior by that criminal dictatorship in Beijing."

Recent controversy on alleged missile technology transfers to China, is expected to fuel efforts to deny China's MFN status. The day before Clinton's announcement, Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) said, "I think there are some who are making the erroneous connection between MFN and all the other questions that have now arisen regarding our relationship with China. . . . Passage of MFN for an indefinite period of time is clearly within our best interest."

Tobacco bill bogs down amid partisan rancor

On June 9, Senate Democrats lost a cloture vote designed to move the tobacco legislation closer to a vote on final passage. Despite four days of debate, none of the pending amendments, including the Gregg-Leahy amendment stripping liability limitations out of the bill, had been voted on. Republicans complain that the bill is

a giant tax increase (proposals would increase the tax on a pack of cigarettes by \$1.10 or \$1.50), while Democrats accuse Republicans of trying to kill the bill without voting on it.

One of the issues complicating debate is an amendment by Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) to repeal the so-called marriage tax penalty (where a married working couple pay more in taxes than they would if they were single). While Democrats say they support repealing the marriage penalty in principle, Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) complained that Gramm's intention is to use the revenue raised by the tobacco bill to cover his tax cut. Democrats want those revenues to go to smoking cessation programs and tobacco-related health care costs.

Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) complained on June 8 that "the bill has grown and grown and grown, and what has happened is that greed has just taken over, that it's way beyond now things that are directly related to smoking." He admitted that many of the amendments offered to the bill would damage its chances of passage. He said that Democratic obstructionism, which he described as "counterproductive," was holding up work on other bills, which would force him to take the tobacco bill off the floor soon.

Daschle restated the Democratic commitment to passing the bill. He threatened that if the GOP doesn't move the bill any faster, then Democrats would move it the hard way. "The hard way," he said, "is that we offer tobacco as an amendment to every bill that comes down the pike. We'll offer it on every bill on the calendar if that's the only way we're going to get attention to the issue."

Another complication is the bill's tax provisions. The Constitution requires that revenue bills originate in

the House, which holds up passage in the Senate until the House acts on a similar bill. So far, there has been little indication that that is going to happen.

School prayer amendment defeated in House

The House spent the afternoon of June 4 debating a proposed amendment to the Constitution that would "restore religious freedom" in the United States. The proposal went the way of many other proposed amendments, such as term limits and flag desecration, since Republicans took control of Congress in 1995. It came up 66 votes short of the 290 required for referral to the states for ratification.

The amendment would have recognized "the people's right to acknowledge God according to the dictates of conscience" on any public property, including in public schools. Charles Canady (R-Fla.) said that it was necessary because of Federal court rulings restricting such rights. He argued that Federal courts making rulings based on the idea of a "wall of separation" between church and state, really mean that "any religious influence should be removed from the public sphere."

Bobby Scott (D-Va.), reflecting the sentiment of many Democrats, said that if the amendment were to be ratified, "the religious freedoms that protect all Americans would be transformed into a divisive manifestation of the very problems the First Amendment was designed to protect us from." Scott pointed to a religious freedom statute drafted by Thomas Jefferson and passed by the Virginia General Assembly, "in response to a failed system of government-sanctioned religious practices very similar to that which would occur if this amendment is ratified."