

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Gun control derails juvenile crime bill

Debate on the GOP's showcase juvenile crime bill took a sharp partisan turn toward a focus on gun control, in the aftermath of the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado that took the lives of 14 students and a teacher. Even before gun control became the focus, however, debate had revealed a party-line split in the Senate over the bill itself. When debate began on May 11, Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) described a bill that was oriented toward increased law enforcement, tougher penalties for violent juvenile offenders, and greater "parental empowerment."

Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.), who reflected the views of many Democrats, complained, "I see a whole lot of emphasis on punitive measures, locking up more children. I do not see a whole lot by way of effort to keep children from getting into trouble in the first place."

At the outset of the debate, Hatch foreshadowed the difficulties that would arise. "The test for the Senate . . . will be whether we choose to play politics with the gun issue or work in a bipartisan manner to ensure that access to firearms by juveniles is tightly controlled and that the laws are fully enforced," he said.

The fireworks began on May 12 when Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) offered an amendment to regulate firearms sales at gun shows. Lautenberg's amendment, and a GOP alternative sponsored by Hatch and Larry Craig (R-Id.), began three days of contentious argument. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) called the GOP alternative a "Swiss cheese amendment," because of its many loopholes. All this led an exasperated Hatch to say, "I really believe there is an effort in this body by some to never have a juvenile justice bill." Hatch offered a clarifying

amendment to close the loopholes that the Democrats were complaining about, but, in any event, the Hatch-Craig amendment passed by a vote of 48-47, with six Republicans jumping ship to oppose it.

Farmers shortchanged by GOP, Democrats say

On May 13, Democratic Senators held a press conference to vow that, no matter what, they will continue their efforts to aid farmers who are being devastated by low agricultural commodities prices. The press conference came the morning after the conference committee working on the emergency supplemental appropriations bill had narrowly rejected a Democratic plan to provide a \$4.3 billion aid package above and beyond what was already in the bill. Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) said, "We will use whatever means available to us to make our case."

Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) reported that he and Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) watched the Republican members of the conference committee "decide that they wanted to nearly double the amount of money for defense spending," but "when we raised the question about family farmers, they plead poverty." He said, "If we've got \$5 billion or \$6 billion extra for defense spending the Defense Department didn't ask for, then we've got the money to provide decent price supports during collapsed income for family farmers." Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) warned that what the GOP action translates into, is that "a whole lot of family farmers are going to be driven off the land."

Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) recalled the scene two years ago, when Democrats from both the House and the Senate held an all-night vigil in the Capitol Building to get a disaster relief bill passed. "What does it take," he asked,

"to get the attention of the Republican leadership around here when it comes to rural America? They say that they're friendly with the families across America who are struggling with these problems, yet when it comes time to put up or shut up, they can't produce." He vowed that the Democrats will continue to wage this fight because "if we don't come to the rescue, the farm families across this country will continue to suffer."

Emergency supplemental passes the House

On May 18, the House passed a conference report by a vote of 269-158 that combined two separate emergency supplemental appropriations bills into one \$15 billion measure, the bulk of which goes to the Pentagon, but also includes disaster assistance for Central America, \$574 million for agricultural assistance, and funding for recovery efforts in Oklahoma and Kansas in the aftermath of recent disastrous tornadoes.

David Obey (D-Wisc.), the ranking minority member on the committee, told the House that while he thought there was "much good" in the bill, his main problem was "that it is a symbol of the mendacity that dominates the Federal budget process." He complained that there was \$5 billion in the bill "above and beyond" what is needed for military operations in the Balkans, and it was there because, according to the chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, Pete Domenici (R-N.M.), "we had to pour as many dollars into this bill because it will be labeled an emergency and will not count against spending limits." This means, Obey said, that it frees up about \$5 billion worth of "pork" in the regular Defense Appropriations bill, which the committee will begin work on shortly.