

## Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

### Hopes for China trade bill hang on Senate

With House Democrats becoming increasingly rebellious against giving China permanent normal trade relations status, the White House is pinning its hopes on the Senate. U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky told reporters on March 6, "The Senate has basically indicated, particularly the Senate Finance Committee, that it wishes to proceed immediately with consideration of legislation, and certainly the administration is not about to suggest to the Senate that it not do so." She echoed President Clinton's promise of a few days earlier that legislation would be sent to the Hill by mid-week.

However, the bill will still face a rough ride in the Senate. About an hour after Barshefsky's comments, a staffer for the Finance Committee told reporters that Committee Chairman William Roth's (R-Del.) goal is "to build momentum for the deal as a whole," rather than focussing on getting it through the House. Constitutionally, the bill will be a revenue bill, and revenue bills have to originate in the House, which makes it unlikely that, were the Finance Committee to report the bill before the House Ways and Means Committee, the Senate would vote on it first, at least, not without some procedural maneuver that would make a Senate vote acceptable to the House. However, committee action is not likely to occur before all the issues of concern are aired.

In the House, Minority Whip David Bonior (D-Mich.) claimed on March 2 that there are 128 Democrats opposed to the bill. With at least 71 Republicans also opposed, that would be 199 votes against the trade agreement, 19 short of the number needed to kill it. However the House GOP leadership is not confident that they

have all the votes, and they're urging President Clinton to round up more Democrats to vote for the deal.

### Richardson grilled on oil prices and OPEC

While Democrats and Republicans argue about who is ultimately responsible for the current situation in the oil markets, they are united in their demands that the Clinton administration take dramatic action to lower the price of crude oil, and thus lower the prices of gasoline, home heating oil, and diesel fuel. And, hardly anybody on the House International Relations Committee was satisfied by the responses of Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, during a hearing on March 1.

Richardson had just returned from a tour of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Norway, Mexico, and Venezuela, the purpose of which was "to convince, not coerce" oil-producing countries to increase production. He called his tour a success, he said, because he believed he succeeded in convincing the relevant government officials of those countries that they need to consider increasing production. He said that he is "guardedly optimistic" that OPEC will decide to increase production at its March 27 meeting. However, he continued to resist pressure to release oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve.

Members of the committee, in contrast to Richardson's tepid response to the crisis, demanded immediate action. Committee Chairman Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.) announced that he will be introducing a bill to impose sanctions on any oil-producing nation that receives arms or other aid from the United States if it engages in price fixing. This is especially aimed at Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, which re-

ceive U.S. arms and military aid, and yet, in the view of committee Republicans, are participating in a price-fixing scheme that is hurting the U.S. economy.

The day after the hearing, a group of Congressmen from northeastern states emerged from a White House meeting where they pressured the Clinton administration to take some kind of action. Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) said that he had never seen the administration more open to releasing oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve than at that meeting. Sen. Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.) told reporters, "I think the President recognizes that there is a structural problem that needs to be dealt with long-term while we await the OPEC decision that hopefully is responsive to the economic consequences internationally."

### Social Security earnings limit voted down by House

On March 1, the House voted unanimously to repeal the earnings limit for Social Security benefits for people over 65 who elect to continue working. House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Archer (R-Tex.) called the limit, currently \$17,000 per year, "unfair," because it "actually cuts Social Security benefits for many working seniors over the age of 65 and it discourages them from working." Many Democrats echoed Archer's remarks and President Clinton has promised to sign the bill when it gets to his desk.

However, the unanimity of the vote is not an indication of some newfound comity between the parties. Democrats used the opportunity to agitate for their agenda. Fortney "Pete" Stark (D-Calif.) called the whole exercise a "Republican charade," because

“while we are doing this, we are still denying under Republican leadership the chance for the Patients’ Bill of Rights to go forward.” Lloyd Doggett (D-Tex.) added that while the bill provides “well-justified relief” for 5% of senior citizens, “it does nothing for the 95% . . . who rely on Social Security. It does nothing for those seniors whose health does not permit them to work and who would benefit more from getting access to prescription drugs.”

On the Senate side, John Ashcroft (R-Mo.), the chief sponsor of the bill there, on March 7 promised quick action on the bill. He said that repealing the earnings test would help 1.2 million senior citizens who can, and want to work. However, Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.) is threatening to put a hold on the bill because it doesn’t address structural reform of the Social Security system. When asked about this, Ashcroft replied, “We should accommodate the President with a clean bill.”

## **DOE reorganization gets House scrutiny**

Energy Secretary Bill Richardson rode out a storm of hostile questions from the House Armed Services Committee on March 2, on the reorganization of the nuclear weapons functions of the Department of Energy. Legislation passed last year, in the wake of charges of alleged Chinese spying at U.S. nuclear weapons labs, mandated the creation of a National Nuclear Security Agency, which was to be in place by March 1.

Committee Chairman Floyd Spence (R-S.C.) said that a review of the implementation of the act “suggests that the goal of the Department was not to implement the fundamental

changes required by law, but rather to ensure that the existing organizational structure lines of authority and fiscal and managerial practices of DOE remain intact.” He went after the practice of “dual-hatting,” where some DOE officials have positions both DOE-wide and in the new agency. The fact that only 18 employees out of 2,013 in the new agency are dual-hatted did little to appease committee Republicans.

Richardson assured the committee that the new agency is now in place and that the dual-hatting is perfectly legal and necessary. He said that he would be seeking legislation to make changes which would restore the Secretary’s authority over all employees in the Department, a provision which was included in the Senate version of last year’s legislation, but was removed in conference committee.

Richardson complained that he hasn’t been provided with adequate funds to fully implement the reorganization. He said that he had asked for funds for the additional positions, environmental cleanup, counterintelligence, the labs, and for other functions, and hadn’t gotten them. “So I would ask,” he said, “if you want to have a strong, semiautonomous agency, maybe you can help us get some of this money.”

## **Gun control gets renewed emphasis**

President Clinton and Congressional Democrats turned up the heat for gun control legislation, after the fatal shooting of a six-year-old girl by a six-year-old boy in a school in Flint, Michigan on Feb. 29, and a shooting incident in Pittsburgh the following day that left five wounded. Administration efforts culminated in a meeting at the

White House on March 7 between the President and leaders of a conference committee which is negotiating a juvenile crime bill that was passed by both Houses last summer. The conference committee has yet to meet, because of differences over gun control provisions in the bill; Clinton’s intent was to get that process started.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) told reporters after the meeting that he was concerned about convening the conference committee because “instead of helping us to get there, it might help to polarize even more.” He said that the major difference between the GOP and the White House is the provision, originally sponsored by Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.), to provide for background checks at gun shows. Hatch said that the Lautenberg amendment “would basically do away with gun shows and . . . push these people out into the streets where we’d have more problems with guns.” He said that the crime bill is “99% not about guns,” but “some have succeeded in making this a debate about guns when the bill itself is so much more important than that.”

President Clinton said that “for the past eight months, the leaders in Congress have done virtually nothing to complete a final bill.” He called on Congress to send a bill to him by April 20, the first anniversary of the tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. The President asked for the bill to include provisions requiring child safety locks on handguns, banning the importation of large capacity ammunition magazines, extending the Brady law to violent juveniles, and “closing the gun show loophole.” He argued that the Brady law is stopping criminals from buying handguns in gun stores, and its provisions need to be extended to gun shows.