

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Supplemental spending bill passes House

On March 30, the House passed, by a vote of 263-146, a \$13 billion supplemental spending bill that includes the \$1.7 billion Colombia aid package; more than \$6 billion for the Pentagon, including \$2 billion for military operations in Kosovo and East Timor; and \$2 billion for relief from natural disasters and other emergencies.

The bill came to the floor with \$9 billion in funding, but among the numerous amendments added to it, was \$4 billion to address readiness and quality of life issues in the military. Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Jerry Lewis (R-Calif.) said that the amendment was “designed to be responsive to that list of critical high priorities given to us by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the individual service chiefs.”

Democrats responded with cynicism. David Obey (D-Wisc.) said that the amendment was a GOP ploy to get around their own budget plan, passed five days earlier, because it “places a priority on tax cuts, not military spending,” which certain GOP members of the Armed Services Committee are not pleased about.

The sharpest debate, however, occurred over the Colombia aid package. International Relations Committee Chairman Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.) warned, “The specter of a consolidated narco-state only three hours by plane from Miami has made it patently clear that our nation’s vital security interests are at stake.” Opponents of the aid package, such as Greg Ganske (R-Iowa), argued, “We should spend that money on drug treatment and increased border patrol.”

In the Senate, Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) has delayed action on the bill, even though Appropriations Committee Chairman Ted Stevens (R-Ak.) was planning to present

a smaller bill of \$6.5 billion. Lott has been complaining that the bill is too expensive, and he wants to add parts of it to the fiscal 2001 appropriations bills. Stevens admitted that the bill is likely to grow to \$9-12 billion as it passes through the legislative process.

China trade vote gets GOP, White House push

House Republican leaders indicated on March 29 that they will make every effort to hold a vote on extending permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) to China by the end of May. The promise was made, in part, to the Clinton administration, which warned that if the debate is dragged out into the summer, it will become bogged down in election year politics.

The GOP had been demanding that the White House round up 90 to 100 Democratic votes before they would set a date, but they appear to have relented. White House officials argued that a “date certain” would help them get the votes they need. However, Minority Whip David Bonior (D-Mich.) released a letter to the White House on March 30, signed by 20 Democrats who had voted for normal trade relations with China in the past, saying that they have changed their position this year. The pressure from organized labor against the trade deal negotiated with China last fall, is such that the administration’s allies now doubt that they can even get 90 votes out of the 211 Democrats in the House.

Things may not be going so well in the Republican caucus, either. Majority Leader Dick Army (R-Tex.) told reporters on April 3 that 110 Democratic votes are needed to pass PNTR. That would imply that the GOP has only 108 votes, a minority of the 222 Republicans in the House. Army didn’t explain this apparent discrep-

ancy, but expressed confidence that, with a lot of work, the pact will pass the House.

Gas tax repeal gets go-ahead from Senate GOP

On March 30, the Senate voted 86-11 for cloture on a bill to repeal the 4.3¢ per gallon increase in the gas tax passed in 1993. The bill also includes a provision for a Federal tax “holiday” on all motor and aviation fuel taxes if retail prices reach a certain level. For gasoline, that price would be \$2 per gallon.

During debate on the cloture motion, Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) took note of the very real crisis triggered by the recent run-up in crude oil prices, calling it the result of the Clinton administration’s “lack of an energy policy.” He said that the administration “has close ties to radical environmentalists . . . whose strong rhetoric and drastic actions appear more like a new-age religion than a clarion call for good stewardship.” However, his political opportunism revealed itself, when he labelled the 1993 tax hike the “Gore Fuel Tax.”

The bill represents an approach abandoned by the House GOP leadership, because it would have little, if any, effect on the pump price of gasoline, and Democrats wasted no time alluding to this fact. Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) said that the bill has “the potential to devastate our highway and transit programs,” because the revenues from Federal fuel taxes go into the transportation trust funds. He quoted a number of GOP leaders, including House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), Majority Leader Dick Army (R-Tex.), and Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John Warner (R-Va.), on the folly of such action.