

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Senate Begins Debate on China Trade Bill

On Sept. 5, the Senate began debate on a bill to grant Permanent Normal Trade Relations status to China, a bill which the House passed last May. While Senate passage has never been in doubt, the possibility that the Senate might amend the House-passed bill has been a cloud hanging over it. With only a few weeks remaining in the current session, nobody really expects a conference agreement if the Senate amends the bill.

The amendment most opposed by the bill's supporters, was offered on Sept. 11 by Fred Thompson (R-Tenn.) and Robert Toricelli (D-N.J.). It would authorize the President to impose sanctions on any Chinese (or Russian or North Korean) firm that is found to be involved in proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, including denial of access to U.S. capital markets. Thompson argued that such activity "poses a mortal threat to the welfare" of the United States which must be addressed. A parade of Republicans painted a grave picture of the threat supposedly posed by China's proliferation activities.

Max Baucus (D-Mont.) raised the historic diplomatic thaw that has occurred on the Korean peninsula, because Republicans spoke as if it had never happened. "For the first time in 50 years," reconciliation between North and South Korea appears possible, he said, and the United States has been able to resume discussions with North Korea on its missile programs. "What a tragedy it would be if we were required to impose sanctions against North Korea just at the moment when significant progress is possible in that potential tinderbox!" Baucus said that the scope of the amendment was too broad, that it provides for unilateral sanctions, and unilateral sanctions never work, and that the President already has sufficient

authority in existing law to deal with the problems that the bill is intended to address.

Presidential Race Colors Prescription Drug Debate

On Sept. 7, Senate Finance Committee Chairman William V. Roth introduced legislation to implement GOP Presidential candidate George W. Bush's Medicare prescription drug plan. Roth actually introduced two bills: One is within the restrictions of the GOP budget plan passed earlier this year; the second is not, and would require 60 votes for passage.

Roth proposes a temporary plan to provide prescription drug coverage for low-income Medicare beneficiaries while a more comprehensive overhaul of Medicare is carried out. Roth said that he would prefer the larger of the two versions because it offers "more extensive coverage," but either way, the bills "will implement a temporary, state-based program to provide low-income Medicare beneficiaries with prescription drug coverage outside the Medicare program." Roth's first bill covers senior citizens with incomes up to 150% of the poverty level, while the broader one goes up to 175% of poverty.

Democrats pounced on the GOP plan. Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.), in a press conference the same morning, called Roth's legislation a "stop gap" measure. "What we need to do," he said, "is pass a prescription drug benefit in the Medicare program that works, and works for all senior citizens." He added that "those who propose miniature programs with respect to prescription drugs will leave out millions and millions of senior citizens who can't afford prescription drugs." Dorgan vowed that Senate Democrats would force a vote on the issue.

Election Year Politics Promises Turbulent Close

The Congress came back from its Summer recess on Sept. 5 facing a blizzard of work and dozens of unresolved disputes. The number-one obstacle to an orderly exit by the target date of Oct. 6, is the annual appropriations process. Only two of the 13 annual spending bills, for the Department of Defense and Military Construction projects, have been signed into law, and more than half of those that remain face veto threats.

Republicans, who are anxious to campaign for reelection, are accusing Senate Democrats and the White House of conspiring to keep the session going well into October. Democrats, particularly Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), have made no secret of their intent to fight for their agenda, including a patients bill of rights and increasing the minimum wage.

On the minimum wage, House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) has offered to support a \$1 rise over two years if the Democrats will support tax breaks for small business. The GOP made a second offer at a meeting at the White House on Sept. 12. President Clinton invited Congressional leaders from both parties to the White House to discuss possible resolutions to the budget and tax issues that otherwise threaten gridlock. At the meeting, the GOP asked President Clinton to support devoting 90% of next year's budget surplus to debt reduction. Democrats were dubious of the offer, with Daschle telling reporters, "We smell a rat."

The GOP complained that the White House has not been working with them to find compromises. Hastert said, "You can't negotiate with a wall between two parties. You've got to take the wall down and start to talk, and that's what I hope we achieved today."