

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Fiscal Year Starts Without a Budget

In yet another sign that the Federal budget process is not working, Fiscal Year 2004 began with a continuing resolution, a move necessitated by the fact that Congress succeeded in passing only three of the 13 annual spending bills before the Oct. 1 start of the new fiscal year. This repeats Fiscal 2003's process which has produced a budget deficit over \$500 billion, and occurs in spite of Republican control of both Houses of the Congress and the White House. The three bills they managed to pass were the \$368 billion Defense Appropriations bill, and the Homeland Security and Legislative Branch bills.

Representative David Obey (D-Wisc.), the ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations committee, during floor consideration of the continuing resolution on Sept. 25, blamed the present situation on GOP misuse of the budget process. He charged that the annual budget resolution "has been used increasingly each year by the House Republican leadership to assist the House in avoiding reality and ignoring reality." He noted that the budget resolution starts out with an unrealistic set of numbers for revenue as well as spending. To make matters worse, Obey charged, the GOP believes that it can make all of the spending promises that it does, and yet still provide huge tax cuts, "even though we no longer have the surpluses . . . that we were expecting when those tax cuts were passed."

House Appropriations Committee chairman Bill Young (R-Fla.), responding to Obey, admitted that "It required considerable creativity . . . in order to do what we had to do and still comply with the budget." Obey then described one example of that "creativity," which he called "Enron Ac-

counting 1A." The example was a \$2.2 billion appropriation to the Department of Education, that was appropriated in Fiscal 2003, as an advance appropriation for Fiscal 2004; but the continuing resolution moved that advance appropriation back to 2003, so that it would not show up in the 2004 numbers.

Democrats Realize the Danger of Ashcroft

In January of 2001, when the just-defeated Sen. John Ashcroft (R-Mo.) was nominated by incoming President Bush to be United States Attorney General, Lyndon LaRouche warned that, should the United States face a major crisis, Ashcroft would be prone to a Reichstag-Fire type of response. On Sept. 24, Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) noted that response in introducing a bill to repeal parts of the so-called Patriot Act, the legislation granting the Justice Department wide ranging police state powers, that was demanded by Ashcroft in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks.

Kucinich said that in the 2 years since the 9/11 attacks, "this nation has undergone a dramatic political change, leading to an unprecedented assault on the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights. . . . Today, our nation has reached a critical turning point. Will we live in perpetual fear and continue to allow the disintegration of our basic rights and liberties? Will we stand by as the Administration formulates a second, more dangerous Patriot Act because, in the President's words, 'the first bill didn't go far enough?'"

Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.), one of half a dozen Democrats who

appeared with Kucinich, said "Today, I will tell you that the most dangerous man to Americans is John Ashcroft. Without exception, everyday, he comes out with some way to further take away our rights." McDermott cited Ashcroft's declaration that he would defend any branch of government that decides to resist a Freedom of Information Act request. "He will try to keep the American people from knowing anything," he said.

Kucinich expressed confidence that his bill, which would repeal some of the more egregious provisions of the Patriot Act, would be considered by the House. "There is sentiment in the Congress," he said, "to move to challenge this idea that we need to attack our Bill of Rights in order to be safe." That Ashcroft's behavior might be grounds for seeking his removal from office has, apparently, yet to be considered, however.

School Vouchers Hang Up D.C. Funds

A plan to impose a school voucher program on the District of Columbia brought progress on the D.C. Appropriations bill to a halt, on Sept. 25, because of the opposition of most Senate Democrats. The key sponsor of the provision, however, is Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-Cal.) making the disagreement as much intra-party as it is partisan. Besides having the support of the two managers of the appropriations bill, Senators Mike Dewine (R-Ohio) and Mary Landrieu (D-La.), Feinstein said that she supported the provision because D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams "wants" it, and it is only a 5-year pilot program for 2,000 students in the District public school system.

That was certainly not enough to persuade Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.). Durbin noted that “Members of Congress will do on this bill what they wouldn’t dare do in their own districts or states,” and that the D.C. Appropriations bill usually becomes “that laboratory, that political playground.” He charged that Feinstein’s program is “an experiment with the lives of students,” one that risks subjecting them to private school teachers of lesser qualifications than those demanded of public school teachers. He also urged Mayor Williams not to give up on the public schools.

Feinstein was perplexed by Durbin’s criticism, chalking it up to resistance by the “educational establishment.” However, the supporters of the voucher provision have not yet been able to round up 60 votes to defeat a filibuster. As a result, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) decided, on Sept. 30, to pull the bill from the floor.

Senate GOP Launches Attack on Kennedy

Senate Republicans incapable of accepting any criticisms of the Bush Administration’s policy in Iraq, used about 45 minutes of the Senate’s time, on Sept. 23, to blast Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) for his charge, on Sept. 18, that the Iraq war was a “fraud hatched in Texas.” The attack was led by Sen. Bob Bennett (R-Utah), who went to great lengths to try to prove that the war policy was actually hatched in the Clinton Administration, but that President Clinton could not muster the will power or the international support to actually do something about Saddam Hussein.

Bennett was followed by Sen.

John Warner (R-Va.), who practically described himself as the greatest supporter of the men and women in uniform ever known, and said that Senators should be careful with what they say because of the emotional impact on the young wife, waiting at home with her children, wondering if her husband is going to get out of Iraq of Afghanistan alive.

The strongest Democratic response, besides that of Kennedy himself, came from Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) who went directly after the frauds perpetrated to justify the invasion of Iraq—including Dick Cheney’s claim, last March, that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program. “The reality,” he said, “is that since the fall of Baghdad, practically everything the White House and the President predicted about Iraq has turned out to be wrong.” He then went through each pre-invasion claim to show how they have all turned out to be false. Kennedy, for his part, while not repeating the line about the fraud hatched in Texas, otherwise stood by his charge that the Administration’s rationale for going to war “was built on a quicksand of false assumptions.”

Democrats Demand Iraq ‘Lessons’ Report

The leaking of a classified report entitled “Operation Iraqi Freedom: Strategic Lessons Learned,” to the *Washington Times* on Sept. 3, inspired Rep. Robert Wexler (D-Fla.) to introduce a resolution of inquiry demanding that President Bush make that report available to the House of Representatives. According to the *Washington Times*, the report, prepared for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, indicates that the planning for the post-invasion phases of

the Iraq operation was poor to nonexistent. The *Times* quoted the report as saying that “Late formation” of DoD organizations for reconstruction “limited the time available for the development of detailed plans and predeployment coordination.”

Wexler followed with his Sept. 9 resolution calling for providing that report, and other documents relating to reconstruction and security in Iraq, to Congress within 14 days. He said in a statement that the report “demonstrates staggering negligence on the part of” the Bush Administration “and affirms . . . President Bush failed to prepare the American public for the aftermath of the operation in Iraq.” He charged that President Bush’s “reckless and irresponsible post-war planning” has increased the danger of terrorism against the United States and threatened the entire Middle East with destabilization.

The resolution did not fare so well before the two committees of jurisdiction, however. Both the International Relations Committee and the Armed Services Committee reported the resolution adversely, the International Relations Committee voting 24-20 on Sept. 25, and the Armed Services Committee acting similarly on Sept. 30. International Relations Committee chairman Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) argued that the Lessons Learned report “is nowhere near completion, and it would be a disservice to those who must fight our future wars to rush the process of compiling lessons learned.” He also said that the second part of resolution—requesting documents relating to reconstruction and security—is so broad as to make it “virtually impossible” to support. Hyde promised that when the Lessons Learned report is complete, it will be available to any member of Congress who wishes to review it.