

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Byrd Blocks Omnibus Spending Bill

The House and Senate returned on Dec. 8-9 to consider the omnibus Appropriations bill sprung on the Congress just before it recessed for Thanksgiving; and while the House passed it by a vote of 242-176, Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) made good on his threat, and prevented the Senate from passing it without a roll-call vote. While the actual formality of objecting to consideration of the bill by unanimous consent was carried out by Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), Byrd castigated the numerous absent senators who apparently did not have enough time to come back to Washington for the consideration of the bill. The Senate's responsibility, he said, "is to debate and vote on this conference report. We should not have postponed this matter until next year." He said Senators were being asked to "buy a pig in a poke, unknown, unseen."

In the House, Democrats complained of the load of 7,000 earmarks in the package. Rep. David Obey (D-Wisc.) told the House that the appropriations bills "used to provide an opportunity for a debate on priorities." Instead, members are being bought off by the large amount of pork in the bill, which, Obey said, "fundamentally corrupts the process."

The bill combines seven of the 13 annual spending bills, and totals about \$820 billion in spending, including \$328 billion in discretionary spending. Besides the earmarks, Democrats' major complaints were on the provisions removed from the bill after both Houses had actually approved them in earlier votes. These included language limiting media ownership concentration, and blocking a proposed Labor Department rule on overtime eligibility, which Democrats said would take overtime pay away from 8 million

workers currently eligible for it. Also decried by Democrats was the lack of an extension of unemployment compensation benefits, in spite of the fact that unemployment has been growing for three years.

Democrats Charge Abuse of House Rules

Within minutes of the final vote on passage of the omnibus appropriations bill, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) introduced a privileged resolution calling on the House to denounce the Republican leadership's holding open of the Nov. 22 vote on passage of the Medicare bill for three hours "for the sole purpose of circumventing the will of the House." In remarks on the floor, Pelosi noted that at least six times prior to the Medicare vote, House Republicans had rammed through crucial bills in the middle of the night, usually Friday nights between midnight and 4:00 a.m. Furthermore, the Republican leadership consistently excludes Democrats from the legislative process. "It is not for this," she said, "that our Founding Fathers sacrificed their lives, their liberty and their sacred honor, so that we could have government of the few, by the few, for the few, behind closed doors."

The Republicans brought out Rep. Nancy Johnson (R-Conn.), one of the authors of the Medicare bill, and House Rules Committee chairman David Dreier (R-Calif.) to defend the GOP's conduct. Dreier argued that the holding open of the Medicare vote for hours was in compliance with the House rules, because the rule at issue only specifies 15 minutes as a minimum, but no maximum. But a careful reading of the rule shows that it exists to ensure sufficient time for all members to vote in roll-call votes, not to

give time to influence the outcome of a vote. No Republicans were willing to challenge the GOP leadership, and Pelosi's resolution was tabled by 207-182.

Blumenauer Says Investigate Wal-Mart

Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.), whose own state has been hit hard by the collapse of manufacturing jobs, fired a blast at Wal-Mart during a five-minute speech on the floor of the House on Dec. 9. He began by noting that Wal-Mart's cost-containment strategy drives down wages and costs jobs. The jobs that people do get after a Wal-Mart moves into a community, he said, are \$2-10 less [per hour] than those destroyed." Then there is the impact that a Wal-Mart has, operating on the outskirts of a community, "drawing away the vitality of the main street where business, slowly, is strangled."

Blumenauer noted that this cost-cutting strategy "appears to be a corrosive impact on Wal-Mart itself. . . . There is illegal coercion of their own employees who may be interested in unions, and illegal roadblocks to people who would organize." He then took on Wal-Mart's use of contractors who hire and abuse illegal immigrants, as well as their refusal to allow auditing of their overseas suppliers.

Blumenauer called on Congress "to start now investigating the practices of America's largest retailer, particularly as it relates to labor and employment." He also suggested that consumers "should begin to consider whether the lowest price is worth any cost: to the poor of the world, to suppliers here at home, to the health of our main streets, and the abuse of Wal-Mart workers and Americans denied basic organizing rights."