

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Appropriations Process Shows Little Sign of Life

With time fast running out before the scheduled Oct. 8 adjournment of the 108th Congress, the only question remaining about the appropriations process, is not whether there will be a continuing resolution to fund agencies at existing levels into Fiscal 2005, but how long that continuing resolution will be. So far, only one of the 13 annual spending bills has been completed and signed into law, that being the defense bill, signed by President Bush on Aug. 5.

While the House has only two more bills to work on, the Senate has only passed two others, the homeland security bill and the military construction bill.

The homeland security bill, which the Senate voted up on Sept. 14, is now hung up in a dispute with the House over a Senate provision to extend Customs Service user fees to raise \$784 million. House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas (R-Calif.) is objecting to going to conference with the Senate on the bill, because under the Constitution, revenue-raising bills can only originate in the House.

The issue of the continuing resolution is what is causing the most nervousness, however, because it would fund affected agencies at Fiscal 2004 levels. The budget hawks want a year-long CR because they see it as a way to hold down spending.

Chief Justice of the Supreme Court William Rehnquist sees it as a disaster, however. In a Sept. 13 letter to House leaders, Rehnquist warned that a CR would result in "even larger staff reductions, possibly affecting thousands of valued employees," after low Fiscal 2004 funding already resulted in the forced firing of hundreds of court staff and probation officers to be fired.

Speaking to reporters on Sept. 21, Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Penn.) said that the Senate is working to pass more bills, but confirmed that wrapping up some of them in an omnibus bill is likely. Whether that happens in a lame duck session or in January will largely determine the outcome of any continuing resolution.

Senate Panel Haggles Over Intelligence Reform

The Senate Governmental Affairs Committee on Sept. 21 began work on a bill to reform the intelligence community. The bill had been introduced a week earlier, by committee chairman Susan Collins (R-Me.) and Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.), and drew largely from the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission as well as the eight hearings the committee held after the commission's report was released. On announcing the bill, Collins said that while the country has made progress since the 9/11 attacks, "we believe it is essential that we build on that progress by enacting the most sweeping and significant intelligence reforms in decades."

A major difference between the current bill, and an earlier one introduced by Lieberman and Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) on Sept. 7, is that the new National Intelligence Director would not have operational authority over intelligence agencies within the Department of Defense, though he would still have budget authority. The office of the NID is also structured differently. In the original McCain-Lieberman bill, the NID's deputies would come from other agencies, but in the committee bill, the NID chooses his own deputies.

Bush Policy in Iraq Slammed in Hearing

On Sept. 15, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a highly contentious hearing on accelerating U.S. assistance to Iraq. Committee Chairman Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), and Senators Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) and Joe Biden (D-Del.) all expressed total frustration toward the Bush Administration, over having been originally told that they had to pass the \$18 billion supplemental appropriation to help the troops and rebuild Iraq, and now finding out that only about 6% of the supplemental has been used.

Lugar stated that in a society with no jobs, a faltering economy, and little or no infrastructure, there is plenty of reason to be angry and want to fight. He further commented that the Committee had heard blindly optimistic people from the Administration prior to the war, and people outside the Administration, "what I call the 'dancing in the street crowd,' [saying] that we just simply will be greeted with open arms. Now the nonsense of all of that is apparent and the lack of planning is apparent."

The funds that the Administration wants to shift around are those funds earmarked for water, sewer, and electricity. Senator Biden related a story of how Maj. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the commander of the 1st Cavalry Division in Baghdad, had used \$30 million of the rebuilding money in the area around Sadr City, which had 12 feet of garbage piles and sewage flowing through the street.

General Chiarelli started to do something about the conditions, said Biden, and when he did, the number of attacks in the area dropped off, as if falling off a cliff. So, he emphasized, there is an obvious connection between security and the need for infrastructure.