

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Bipartisan Worries Grow Over Bush Iran Policy

Echoes of Lyndon LaRouche's warning about the dangers of a U.S. strike on Iran have sounded in the U.S. Congress, from both sides of the aisle. On June 8, a group of 11 conservative Republicans sent a letter to President Bush calling for opening direct talks with Iran on the matter of its nuclear program. The letter notes that there have been no direct talks with Iran in 26 years, and that the "no negotiation" stance "has not yielded positive results." The letter also notes that, on at least two occasions, the Iranian government has attempted to open contact with the U.S.: in March of 2003, and in President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's letter of May 2006; and yet, neither of these two approaches resulted in U.S. moves towards dialogue.

"If we hope to convince the American people, our allies, and the international community that we are serious about resolving this matter diplomatically, the United States must be open to direct diplomatic channels to Tehran," the letter says. "No diplomatic approach that rejects direct talks with Iran can be regarded as a serious effort to seek a peaceful solution." Signers of the letter include Reps. Walter Jones (R-S.C.), Jim Leach (R-Ia.), Wayne Gilchrest (R-Md.), Ron Paul (R-Tex.), Roscoe Bartlett (R-Md.), Howard Coble (R-N.C.), John J. Duncan, Jr. (R-Tenn.), Philip S. English (R-Pa.), Scott Garrett (R-N.J.), Gil Gutknecht (R-Minn.), John N. Hostettler (R-Ind.), and C.L. Otter (R-Id.).

On the Democratic side, Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) introduced a resolution of inquiry on May 25, which garnered 24 co-sponsors, requesting from the Bush Administration certain documents relating to plans and strategies for either regime change or mili-

tary strikes against Iran. When the House International Relations Committee met, on June 21, to mark up the resolution, Lee noted the May 31 announcement by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice regarding pursuing diplomacy with Iran, but warned that the Bush Administration policies of regime change and preemptive war are still on the table. "Diplomacy," she said, "is not simply a check box that we mark off on the way to war."

Not surprisingly, the committee perfunctorily disposed of Lee's resolution with a voice vote to report it adversely. However, it also exposed a split among the Democrats because it was not supported by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), the ranking Democrat on the committee.

Under Probe, Jefferson Dumped From Committee

The House Democratic Caucus voted 99-58 to recommend that Rep. William Jefferson (D-La.) be removed from the House Ways and Means Committee. The vote came after what was described as a "grueling and emotional" three-and-a-half hour caucus meeting on June 15. Most of the contention appears to have come from the fact that while Jefferson is the subject of a Federal corruption investigation, he has not been indicted. Caucus rules do not provide for the removal from a committee assignment of a member who has not been indicted. During the meeting, Rep. Steve Rothman (D-N.J.) introduced a motion to table the matter to allow time to change the rules, but he was defeated in a 91-61 vote. "In the absence of any rule, I felt this was extremely arbitrary and invited potential abuse," he told reporters afterwards.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pe-

losi (D-Calif.), who was pushing to remove Jefferson from the committee, has made the GOP's "culture of corruption" a central feature of the Democrats' campaign to retake the House in November, and Pelosi was determined to make Jefferson an example to "prove" the Democrats' superiority on ethics. Jefferson himself noted this when he spoke to reporters after addressing the Democratic caucus. "I've pointed out that it's important that we follow the rules, and not, subjectively and on an ad hoc basis, find cases that we think we can make certain points on, and then use those in ways which I think are unfair and unwise," he said.

On the day after the caucus meeting, Democratic Caucus Chairman Rep. James Clyburn (D-S.C.) brought to the House floor a privileged resolution removing Jefferson from his committee assignment, and it was agreed to without objection.

Senate GOP Feints at Federal Spending Control

The Senate Budget Committee, on June 20, approved a package of budget process reforms that, in the words of committee chairman Judd Gregg (R-N.H.), "try to put controls on Federal spending so that we can pass on to our children a budget that's balanced and a government they can afford." The Republicans call it "Stop Over Spending," or S-O-S, for short; it were better termed a recipe for disaster.

The package consists of eight provisions that, together, Gregg also labels "the Big Bang approach to controlling Federal spending." The first is a modified version of President Bush's line-item veto proposal. The second, is a mechanism that ties entitlement spending and how much it affects the deficit to the Gross National Product.

Third, is a point of order against new entitlement spending if 45% of Medicare spending comes out of general funds. Fourth, is discretionary spending caps; and the fifth item is what amounts to a BRAC (Military Base Closure Commission) for the rest of the government. Sixth, is a commission to reform entitlement programs. The seventh provision is for a two-year budget cycle; and the last provision is a reform of the reconciliation process to make it "more effective."

Sen. Kent Conrad (D-N.D.), the ranking Democrat on the Budget Committee ridiculed the Republican plan, after it was announced on June 14. "This S-O-S plan might be better termed 'Save Our Seats' because what they have come up with is a political plan," Conrad said. "It has nothing to do with a budget plan and I would submit to you the reason for that is they have been the architects of the greatest fiscal failure in the history of our country." He warned that "They would seek to create a fast track process to shred Social Security and Medicare; something they couldn't do in the normal process they seek to do with a special process."

GOP Prevents Vote on Increase in Minimum Wage

On June 21, House Majority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) followed through on a vow not to allow an increase in the minimum wage. A week earlier, the House Appropriations Committee had passed an amendment to the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Departments appropriations bill, increasing the minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7.25 per hour, by Jan. 1, 2009. Seven Republicans joined with Committee Democrats to approve the amendment. The

bill was scheduled to go to the House floor on June 21, but Boehner pulled it from the calendar. Democrats then tried to attach the amendment to the Commerce, Justice, State Departments and the Judiciary appropriations bill, on June 20, but that effort failed in committee when five of the Republicans who voted for it the first time, voted against it the second time.

A proposal for a minimum-wage increase, sponsored by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), was also defeated in the Senate. Although seven Republicans joined with Democrats to add the amendment to the defense authorization bill, the 52 votes fell short of the 60 required under an agreement worked out earlier during consideration of the bill. Sen. Mike Enzi (R-Wyo.) offered a compromise amendment that would have provided for an increase of \$1.10 over 18 months, but even that paltry offer was rejected on a 53 to 45 vote.

Republicans trotted out the tired argument that an increase in the minimum wage would cost jobs and cause inflation. Kennedy countered that the minimum wage has not been increased for nine years, while Senators' salaries have risen by 30%. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi vowed to reporters on June 21 that the Democrats will show the "stark contrast" between the refusal of the GOP to increase the minimum wage, and their eagerness to permanently repeal the estate tax.

House Rubber-Stamps Bush-Cheney Iraq Quagmire

The House GOP leadership continued its tradition as a rubber-stamp for Administration policy, by bringing to the floor a resolution, without allowing any amendments, declaring its support for the Bush-Cheney war on terror—

a resolution that Democrats charged might have been written by Karl Rove, himself.

Democrats responded to the Republican ploy by denouncing it as a blatant political act. They also gave Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) wide latitude to shape the Democrats' response by allowing him to control the Minority's floor time, and by endorsing his opposing resolution for the redeployment of U.S. troops out of Iraq. "There's only one battle plan," said Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.), "the Murtha resolution, and that's what we should be debating."

The Republicans cast the issue as if there were only two choices, "stay the course" or "cut and run." The only Republican who expressed disagreement with this line was Rep. Jim Leach (R-Ia.), who warned that the "neo-con desire for a permanent presence in a divided Muslim country is foolhardy." He further warned that continued fighting in Iraq could actually increase the likelihood of further attacks outside the region. Instead of "staying the course," he said that we should "avoid overstaying."

Prior to the debate, a number of other Republicans denounced the whole exercise. Rep. Wayne Gilchrest (R-Md.) was quoted in the June 15 *Washington Post*: "While you were in combat, you had a sense of urgency to end the slaughter, and around here we don't have that sense of urgency." Rep. Thaddeus McCotter (R-Mich.) called the resolution "strategically nebulous and morally obtuse." Rep. Walter Jones, Jr. (R-N.C.) said: "This is nothing more or less than really a charade."

The resolution passed on June 16 by a 256 to 153 vote, with 42 Democrats voting in favor, and three Republicans, John Duncan (Tenn.), Leach, and Ron Paul (Tex.), voting against.