Congressional Closeup

by Barbara Dreyfuss and Susan Kokinda

Appropriations for 1981: some on, some off

The first lame-duck session since the Truman administration began on Nov. 12. With the election of a Republican President and Republican Senate and with many new congressional faces, the 96th Congress was willing to have the session deal with few substantive policy issues. Meetings of the Senate Democratic caucus and the House Democratic leadership during the first two days of the session decided against bringing up a tax cut during the lame-duck session.

The main focus of the legislative session is passage of the second concurrent budget resolution and several appropriations bills. It is expected that no action will be taken now on at least four of the appropriations bills—Foreign Operations, Labor and Education, and Agriculture—and that continuing resolutions, keeping funding for their programs at 1980 levels, will be passed.

On Nov. 17 the Senate, by a vote of 51 to 35, passed the State, Justice, and Commerce appropriations bill. Included in the measure was a provision prohibiting the government from using any of its funds to implement a grain embargo now or in the future.

The Justice Department bill restored $1.7 million of the $3 million cut by the Carter administration from the Drug Enforcement Agency. The Senate also voted up $9.5 million for special state drug information-sharing programs. The Senate also approved, by a vote of 76 to 4 on Nov. 17, the Interior Department appropriation bill.

There were few differences between the Senate bill and that passed weeks ago by the House, so a resolution by a conference committee is expected quickly. Also awaiting action by conference committees are the appropriations bills for HUD and the District of Columbia. The Treasury and Post Office appropriations bill will be acted upon before the Thanksgiving holiday in the Senate, and it too may be resolved by a conference committee before Dec. 5, when the 96th Congress will end.

Revenue sharing wins extension

The House voted 345 to 23 on Nov. 13 to extend federal revenue sharing to cities and towns for three years. Under the bill the localities will get $4.6 billion a year. Opponents of revenue sharing, which allows localities to spend the money as they see fit provided they first hold public hearings, tried to take state governments out of the program. But an amendment on this by Rep. Jack Brooks (D-Tex.), chairman of the Government Operations Committee, was soundly defeated. Rep. Elliott Levitas (D-Ga.), in a move to keep down federal spending, offered an amendment that for every dollar of revenue-sharing funds accepted, a state had to return an equal amount of categorical grant money, federal funds earmarked for specific programs. The House adopted this amendment, while authorizing $2.3 billion for no-strings-attached state revenue-sharing programs in 1982 and 1983 if Congress appropriates the funds. The Senate will vote on the measure before Thanksgiving. Sen. J. James Exon (D-Neb.) is considering introducing an amendment similar to the Levitas provision.

Alaska Lands bill has interim success

By a voice vote the House approved the highly controversial Alaska Lands Bill Nov. 12. The bill prevents development by lumbering, oil, or mining interests of 104 million acres of Alaska lands.

The House passed a Senate version of the bill, rather than the even more restrictive House bill written by Rep. Morris Udall (D-Ariz.). Udall himself urged passage of the somewhat more moderate Senate bill, rather than take the chance that no bill would pass. "We didn't know what the new President would do" without any guiding legislation, declared an aide to Udall. The congressman told the House that he will try to make the measure more restrictive in the next Congress. Alaska's only congressman, Republican Don Young, who had led the fight against any restrictive bill, realized he could not stop the bill. Young announced he will "come back in the next Congress and unlock more of our lands for mineral development." Young was worried that without any bill President Carter, who avidly supports closing Alaska to developers, would prevent development by executive order.

On a second energy front, the

Northwest Power Bill (S. 885), which allows the Bonneville Power Authority to purchase power from utilities, combine it with Bonneville's hydroelectrically generated cheap energy, and sell it at low rates to regional industries and utilities, was passed by the House without debate Nov.

Hearings probe military output capacity

Rep. Richard Ichord (D-Mo.), chairing a special House Armed Services Committee panel on the defense industrial base, has conducted extensive hearings in the field and in Washington, D.C. over the past month. Ichord had requested from the full committee and was given the opportunity, to investigate the erosion of America's industrial infrastructure as it relates to military needs. During the election recess, Ichord and two other panel members, Bob Wilson (R-Calif.) and Dan Daniels (D-Va.), visited defense contractors.

While a solid data base on the state of the defense industrial sector will probably be compiled over the course of the hearings, the hearings themselves seemed to be running on two different tracks. This became clear on Nov. 12, when the head of the American Defense Preparedness Association (a private/industry group), Gen. Henry Miley (Ret.), testified that the principal problem of the base was an erratic procurement policy on the part of the federal government. Miley proposed three remedies for this; multi-year contracts, the ability of defense contractors to factor in rising interest rates as part of their costs, and greater depreciation-allowance schedules for the defense industry.

Rep. Don Bailey, a Democrat on the panel from the hard-hit industrial state of Pennsylvania, asked, "Is it just a question of maintaining our production lines, or is it the problem further down the line? There is a debate going on in this country about whether we should keep certain fundamental heavy industry capacities. I think we have to look at this question by tying military needs to general economic needs and look at our primary and secondary manufacturing capacities all the way through."

House lowers the Senate budget ceiling

The House adopted a $631.7 billion federal budget for fiscal 1981, when they voted 203 to 191 on Nov. 18 to adopt the second concurrent budget resolution. The vote on the binding budget ceiling was basically along party lines. Republicans had wanted to delay the budget until the new administration takes office in January.

The House Democrats had originally aimed at a higher budget level, but after the election retiring House Budget Committee chairman Robert Giaimo (D-Conn.), in a fit of pique, declared that since the new President thought he could cut the budget 2 percent, Giaimo was going to force him to live up to his claims. Giaimo pushed through the committee a 2 percent across-the-board budget cut, lowering the total budget figure from $648 to $631 billion. On Nov. 19, the Senate voted 48 to 46 to adopt a $633 billion budget. A conference committee the same day set the final budget figure at $632.4 billion. The Office of Management and the Budget proposed a budget ceiling of $633.8 billion in July.

Testimony urges auto import curbs

The House Ways and Means Committee's subcommittee on trade held hearings on Nov. 18 on the auto industry and foreign competition. The hearings focused on House Joint Resolution 598, introduced by Michigan Democrats Don Albosta and William Brodhead and Indiana Democrat John Brademas. HJR 598 authorized the President to enter into negotiations with the Japanese to secure orderly marketing agreements on auto production. Subcommittee chairman Charles Vanik (D-Ohio) keynoted the hearing by noting the recent decision by the International Trade Commission not to impose trade restrictions on Japanese auto imports. Vanik stated, "Just because the ITC has not acted, does not mean that Congress cannot."

A parade of congressmen and senators from Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio all catalogued the effect of auto unemployment on their states and urged that the incoming President negotiate an orderly marketing agreement to give the auto industry the three to four years which it will need to retool, rebuild, and become competitive.