

## Congressional Closeup by William Jones

### **E**nvironmentalists push tougher restrictions

In hearings before the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Policy, Trade and Environment on March 1, a host of environmentalists, playing up the lie of the "greenhouse effect," called for tougher environmental restrictions from the Clinton administration. They criticized in particular the National Action Plan for Global Climate Change put out by the State Department during the last days of the Bush administration. Subcommittee Chairman Sam Gejdenson (D-Conn.) called for revising the plan, to include definite commitments to reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions below 1990 levels and for a concrete program as to how greenhouse emissions will be improved and how emissions reduction will be coordinated.

Most witnesses criticized the action plan as being far too little, with many backing the levels demanded by the so-called Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, to reduce greenhouse emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000. One witness, T.J. Glauthier, director of the Energy and Climate Change Policy of the World Wildlife Fund, called on the administration to make the draft plan's technology transfer section (transferring the technologies, practices, and processes that control, reduce, or prevent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases) an issue of "strategic" importance for the United States.

However, Michael Baroody, senior vice president for policy and communications of the National Association of Manufacturers, urged caution. "Proceeding on a unilateral basis to stabilize or reduce greenhouse gas emissions, in the absence of an international agreement applicable to all nations emitting greenhouse gases and with an effective enforcement

mechanism, could place U.S. industry at a competitive disadvantage in world markets and could harm our nation's economy," he warned.

### **G**onzalez attacks NAFTA as bankers' boondoggle

House Banking Committee Chairman Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.) attacked the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as a boondoggle for the bankers. "The truth is," Gonzalez said in floor comments on Feb. 22, "that that [trade] is the caboose, and the engine driving that so-called trade agreement is the finance or the banking. Remember that at the bottom of everything is banking—everything. It always has been, it is now, and it always will be."

Gonzalez noted how the speculative "derivatives" are "rocking the whole unstable international currency markets." And the consequence? "Well, all this now is being translated into activities south of the border where one of the hottest speculative giant casino operations has begun and which is impacting America because it involves American bank credit and American investors."

Gonzalez said that he had put out four press releases about a month ago on the *maquiladoras* (foreign-owned sweatshops in Mexico), but that "no newspaper, either in Texas or in my area or up here, would pick them up. So it went unreported."

Gonzalez attributed the lame response of the American population to this looming disaster to the deleterious effects of television. "We live in a frenzied world, so that we become accustomed to accepting what is known as the electronic description of things, the television image. . . . It is the

good old American tendency since the end of the war not to focus in on anything that goes beyond the immediate crisis, and then, instead of preparing and anticipating, we sit until we are wallowing in crisis."

He warned that there were no "quick" solutions to the present economic crisis: "We have for 40 years pushed aside the emerging issues which now have developed to the point where you are not going to have a push-button solution no matter how much our new President wants or anybody. It is going to take time if at all."

One of the main effects of the unfolding crisis that concerned him was the unraveling of the value of the dollar, which has suffered, he noted, a "consistent, sustained loss of value since 1985, which incidentally was the same year that we became a debtor nation for the first time since 1914." The result of that would be, he warned, that "the United States for the first time in its history will have to be paying back the monumental debt, both on the private, as well as the corporate, and especially the governmental, debt in somebody else's currency."

### **G**raham pushes for high-speed rail program

Sen. Bob Graham (D-Fla.) introduced legislation on Feb. 25 which would accelerate the construction of high-speed rail systems in the country. The Graham proposal would lift the caps on the issuance of tax-exempt bonds for high-speed rail construction.

As Graham indicated in proposing the High-Speed Rail Incentives Act, airports and seaports are already exempt from caps on their revenue bonds. The Graham proposal would

add high-speed rail to the list. "The expectation is that a full expansion of high-speed rail will require the development of new tracks and electrification of those tracks, and a key issue for that subsequent development will be the availability of tax-free bond financing."

In terms of efficiency, Graham correctly noted, "two tracks of high-speed rail can potentially carry as many travelers as 10 lanes of an interstate highway system. . . . Electrified rail is four times more efficient in terms of cost of energy per passenger-mile than airplane travel, three times more efficient than automobiles."

Graham also made reference to the 19th-century tradition of "internal improvements." "In the 19th century," he said, "the federal government assisted in the creation of canals and river transportation and railroads. In this century, the interstate system has redrawn the map for urban and rural America. The question before us, as we enter the 21st century, is what will be our contribution to the mobility of Americans in the next century?"

## **C**linton package lacks votes, says Mitchell

Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Me.) indicated in an interview on Face the Nation on Feb. 28 that he didn't think there was yet enough support on Capitol Hill to pass the Clinton economic program. We don't have "a sufficient number of senators committed," said Mitchell.

Mitchell indicated that there was some idea of trying to combine the economic and the health care reform packages into one "megabill" that Congress would consider this summer. Mitchell expressed the hope that

the votes would eventually be there. "I think what's happening is that passage of this economic program is increasingly being seen by the American people as a test of whether or not this government can function and whether Congress can do anything," he said.

Passage in the House, where the Democrats have a significantly larger majority than in the Senate, is not in doubt. Nevertheless, there is strong opposition from Republicans to the \$16.3 billion short-term economic stimulus. They also refuse to support the tax package as long as increased taxes are a part of it. "In its present form, he's not getting Republican support in the Senate," said Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.).

Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.), one of the authors of the abortive Gramm-Rudman resolution, has offered an amendment which would place a cap on domestic spending instead of raising any Social Security, income, or energy taxes. Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole (Kan.) has also presented an alternative to the Clinton package which would cut domestic spending by some \$100 billion more than proposed by the President.

Also, some Democrats are threatening to offer a balanced budget amendment if the budget cuts are not sufficient for their taste.

## **G**OPers rush to defense of DOJ injustice

Senior House Republicans have rushed to attack efforts to correct injustice in the Department of Justice (DOJ) handling of a fraud and bribery case against Rep. Harold Ford (D-Tenn.). The GOPers attacked efforts by the Congressional Black Caucus to

force an investigation of the stacking the jury in Ford's second trial, and are now seeking an investigation of the DOJ for reversing one of its decisions in the case.

Intervention by the Black Caucus led Acting Attorney General Stuart Gerson to overrule local prosecutors and demand that the Ford trial not be continued with jurors who were to be bused in from predominantly white Jackson, but that a new jury be selected from Memphis, where the trial is to be held. The White House expressed satisfaction with this decision.

House Republicans, gathered at a conference in New Jersey, alleged that the intervention by the Black Caucus had the "clear appearance of impropriety," as Minority Whip Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) characterized it. Black Caucus Chairman Kweisi Mfume (D-Md.) denied any impropriety.

Eight Republicans, including House Minority Leader Robert Michel (Ill.), Gingrich, and Hamilton Fish (N.Y.), ranking Republican on the House Judiciary Committee, also sent letters to the House and Senate Judiciary Committees requesting an investigation into the DOJ's actions. The letter to Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Joseph Biden (D-Del.) also asks that the questions surrounding the case be raised in the upcoming confirmation hearings of Miami prosecutor Janet Reno, President Clinton's choice for attorney general.

Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) charged that the Black Caucus meeting with DOJ officials was "politicizing the [criminal justice] process." The Black Caucus reacted to the Ford case in the context of an unusual number of "fraud" and "conspiracy" cases in the last few years being pursued by the DOJ which have particularly targeted black elected officials.