

## Congressional Closeup by William Jones

### Space station support grows in House fights

In a rare example of bipartisanship, 94 Democrats joined 205 Republicans in rejecting in a 299-126 vote a proposal introduced by David Obey (D-Wisc.) to cut \$1.6 billion in funding for Space Station Freedom. Two years ago, the House came within one vote of ending the 10-year-old space-construction program.

The space station program has become, under agreements signed by U.S. Vice President Al Gore and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, a centerpiece of U.S.-Russian scientific cooperation, and it has the full support of the Clinton administration. The successful conclusion of the Mir-Space Shuttle hook-up in July has boosted support for the program.

"There is broadly based support for exploration in space," said Jerry Lewis (R-Calif.), chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee that drafted the spending bill. "If we destroy the space station, we destroy all of NASA's programs."

### AIDS bill passed over Helms's opposition

The Senate voted overwhelming on July 21 to approve extending the government's AIDS treatment program after rejecting attempts by Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) to gut it. The Senate reauthorized the measure by a vote of 97-3, with only two Republicans joining Helms in opposing it.

Helms, claiming incorrectly that AIDS treatment was getting more funding than research for cancer or heart disease, wanted to freeze spending levels for the Ryan White Care program through the year 2000. The Senate put no limits on spending for

the program, allowing funding levels to be set in annual appropriations bills during the next five years.

The House Appropriations Committee had cut the Clinton administration's request for the AIDS care program by \$65 million, approving only \$658 million for FY 1996 starting on Oct. 1. The Ryan White Care program, named after a young AIDS victim who contracted the disease through a blood transfusion, currently provides care and treatment to more than 350,000 men, women, and children infected with the human immunodeficiency virus, which causes AIDS. It supports clinics in every state, 42 cities, and many rural areas, paying for outpatient medical care for uninsured poor people infected with the virus.

### Republicans start to fracture in House

Tensions are growing among House Republicans over the draconian proposals to cut social programs coming out of Republican-dominated House committees. Republican moderates, faced with a \$60 billion education, health, and labor funding bill, threatened to block consideration unless they were given a chance to knock out strict anti-abortion language that had been put into the legislation by conservative lawmakers.

In other action, a revolt led by Rick Lazio (R-N.Y.) produced significant changes in a housing appropriations bill. At Lazio's urging, the House restored more than \$600 million in housing funds for the elderly, sick, and disabled, and eliminated rent increases. Measures that have eased enforcement of job safety and labor laws have also provoked a revolt from Republicans in districts with

strong labor constituencies, fearing the electoral fall-out from anti-labor provisions.

The internal squabbling over the radical Contract with America provisions hyped by House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and the Republican leadership immediately following the Republican victory in November, is now considered a liability by many Republicans, who are mindful that they must soon face those voters again.

### Gingrich grilled by ethics panel

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) spent three hours before the House ethics panel on July 27 to explain his million-dollar book deal with media tycoon Rupert Murdoch. The original agreement that Gingrich had made with Murdoch-owned HarperCollins for publishing his *To Renew America*, would have netted him a \$4.5 million advance. As the book deal started to become the town's biggest scandal, Gingrich agreed to forego the advance and content himself with the standard royalty. The book is the subject of one of the five ethics complaints raised against Gingrich.

The complaint contends that the Speaker abused his office, in part by using a tax-exempt foundation and one of his political organizations to create a commercial book deal that could earn him millions. As the ethics panel began to look into the deal, panel Chairman Nancy Johnson (R-Conn.) discontinued her daily press briefings on the work of the panel, and even Gingrich himself was unusually tight-lipped after the three-hour session. The session was characterized by Johnson as "very freewheeling."

The only other House Speaker who had been brought before the ethics panel had been Jim Wright (D-Tex.), whom Gingrich, then a relatively new face on Capitol Hill, had hounded over a much more modest book deal. Because of the publicity, Wright was forced to resign.

Meanwhile, Murdoch is awaiting passage of a bill before Congress that would liberalize the telecommunications sector, enabling him to spread his tentacles into the nation's capital. Murdoch, the owner of Fox TV, is also planning a new monthly magazine for Washington, *The Standard*, scheduled to come out in September.

## **E**nvironmental regs squeak through House

The House Republican leadership staved off an embarrassing defeat on July 31, passing in a tie 210-210 vote a package of 17 provisions to the Environmental Protection Agency Appropriations bill that would curb EPA enforcement of clean air and water standards affecting pesticides, emissions from oil refineries and toxic waste incinerators, runoff of storm water and sewage into rivers and lakes, and accident prevention plans in chemical plants. The provisions are a key element in the Contract with America.

However, passage came on the second vote. On July 28, fifty-one Republicans had joined 160 Democrats to eliminate the provisions. House Majority Leader Richard Arney (R-Tex.), under House rules, forced a second vote after all other action on the bill had been completed.

Moderate GOPers warned their conservative brethren that their "Conservative Revolution" was endangering Republican electoral chances for

1996. Voters "may have been voting to get government off their backs, but they weren't voting to get arsenic in their water or benzene in their air," commented Wayne Gilchrest (R-Md.).

The fact that this growing split among GOPers is occurring in the House rather than the Senate is even more significant, because Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and his crew have been the point-men for the Contract with America agenda. House GOPers had hoped that passage of the riders would send a message to senators to move more decisively with the Contract agenda, most of which has failed miserably in the Senate.

## **C**uban nuclear plant turns GOPers green

Republican "yahoos," led by Dan Burton (R-Ind.), chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee, have started to beat the drums over the uncompleted nuclear power plant at Cienfuegos, Cuba. Sounding like a hysterical anti-nuclear activist, Burton called the plant "a national security threat of the first order," in a hearing in late July. He claimed that a plant accident would endanger people in the southwestern United States and large areas of Ibero-America.

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) claimed that "there is no doubt that Castro intends to complete the plant" in order to offer the energy to the tourism industry, "Cuba's major source of hard currency." The only thing worse than Castro's "relentless pursuit to maintain power," she said, is the "silence of the Clinton administration." She said that several members of Congress had written a letter

to President Clinton about the plant, but his response "offered no commitment to stop the construction of this plant." The plant "has to be destroyed. . . . Total elimination is the only solution," she ranted.

Two other Cuban-American congressmen, subcommittee member Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) and Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-Fla.), who testified before the subcommittee, drew blood-curdling images of a Chernobyl-like disaster only 90 miles from the Florida coast that could contaminate 80 million Americans and untold numbers of Ibero-Americans.

However, evidence presented by both the General Accounting Office and the State Department shows that there is little chance that even one of the two reactors will be completed. The GAO, in its testimony, estimated that the cost to complete the first reactor is approximately \$300 million. Richard J.K. Stratford, the director of the State Department's Office of Nuclear Energy Affairs, told the subcommittee that the Russians stopped work on the plant in 1992 "because Cuba could not meet new Russian financial terms, which apparently stipulated that further work would have to be reimbursed via payment in convertible currency." He said that press reports that a consortium of western firms was being formed by Russia to complete the plant have to be taken "with a grain of salt." He added that Cuba still lacks the hard currency to complete construction and that they will, this year, "have their worst sugar crop in 50 years."

But in an election year, anti-Castro posturing and anti-nuclear hysteria may seem like a good combination. Some Republicans have also been concerned about the apparent willingness of the administration to improve relations with the Cuban government.