

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Senate panel considers funds for Bosnia, Iraq

A hearing of the Senate Appropriations Committee on March 6, convened to consider the Clinton administration's supplemental appropriations request for military operations in Bosnia and Iraq, turned into a forum for bashing Clinton administration policy and U.S. allies. The request is for \$1.85 billion for the Pentagon and \$172 million for disaster recovery in the U.S. Northeast, California, and Guam. Of the Pentagon funding, \$1.36 billion is for military operations in the Persian Gulf.

The main criticism centered on burden sharing. Committee Chairman Ted Stevens (R-Ak.) said that he supported "providing the necessary funding . . . but the American taxpayer should not have to pay all of the costs of containing Iraq alone."

Committee Ranking Democrat Robert Byrd (W.V.) complained that in the case of Iraq, "we're not showing leadership. . . . We have been tagging along after the United Nations." He said that extending the U.S. commitment in Bosnia without an end date means that "the pressure to pass off the ground force role to our allies has evaporated," and that the exit strategy is dependent on meeting conditions that amount to "nation-building. . . . This appears to me to be a formula requiring extended duration [presence of U.S. forces], certainly [for] several more years."

Secretary of Defense William Cohen explained to the committee that enormous progress has been made in Bosnia over the last two years. "We believe," he said, "that implementation of the Dayton Accords is changing the conditions that made Bosnia a fuse in a regional powderkeg and our leadership has been essential to sustain that rate of progress."

On Iraq, Cohen explained that the agreement negotiated by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is preferable because a bombing campaign "will not be an adequate substitute for having inspectors who are on the ground knocking on doors, opening doors, and in fact, seeking and overseeing the destruction of those weapons of mass destruction."

Puerto Rico's political status reopened in House

On March 4, the House passed by a vote of 209-208, an apparently benign bill to begin the process of permanently settling the political status of Puerto Rico in its relationship to the United States. The bill requires that Puerto Rico hold a referendum by Dec. 31, 1998, on whether to remain a commonwealth, to become independent, or to apply for statehood. The bill has caused deep splits in both parties, over just what the result of the bill will be should it become law, and on language issues.

The biggest threat to the bill came from an amendment by House Rules Committee Chairman Gerald Solomon (R-N.Y.), requiring that English be the sole official language for Puerto Rico, in all government business and school instruction, should it opt for statehood. Dan Burton (R-Ind.) offered a substitute that, instead of requiring English for all official business, would apply existing laws and encourage "English empowerment." Burton said that Solomon's amendment would "promote continuation of an enclave of Spanish-speaking U.S. citizens, a recipe for creating a Quebec-style separatism under the American flag, which none of us wants." Solomon was accused of using his

amendment as a "poison pill" against the bill; he had already stated his opposition to the bill. Burton's substitute was approved by a vote of 238-182.

Democratic opponents of the bill attacked its language, saying that it was biased toward statehood. Nydia Velázquez (D-N.Y.), a Puerto Rican by birth, complained that the party that supports the commonwealth option was shut out of the process of the drafting of the bill. Instead, "the definition for commonwealth status was written by the very party that opposes it. It is like allowing Republicans to decide who could appear on a Democratic ballot," she said.

Mexico condemned by Feinstein, Coverdell

On March 3, Sens. Paul Coverdell (R-Ga.) and Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) introduced two joint resolutions to disapprove President Clinton's certification of Mexico as a cooperating country in fighting drug-trafficking. Coverdell said that the goal of the resolutions is "that the process would decertify Mexico on this matter with a Presidential waiver in the national interest. . . . This would be an honest appraisal of our circumstances." He said that "the problem with certifying is that it sends a message to the vast populations of the United States and of Mexico that this war is being won, that we have turned a corner, that things are working out." But this a disservice when, in fact, "the message is one of gravity and loss."

Reps. John Mica (R-Fla.) and Clay Shaw (R-Fla.) introduced a similar resolution in the House on March 4. Mica, however, used more provocative language to motivate support for that resolution, accusing the Mexican

government of being involved in “corruption from the street level to its highest offices and ministries.”

Both the House and Senate versions provide for a national security waiver. So far, unlike a year ago, these resolutions have not been accompanied by a campaign to destabilize the government of Mexico.

IMF funding backed by House Banking Committee

On March 5, the House Banking Committee passed a bill to authorize the \$18 billion requested by the Clinton administration for the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The co-sponsors, Committee Chairman Jim Leach (R-Iowa) and ranking member John LaFalce (D-N.Y.), won over critics among both Democrats and Republicans through a “manager’s amendment,” which supposedly addressed everyone’s concerns. It adds to the bill new instructions to the U.S. executive director of the IMF, regarding IMF reform. The U.S. executive director must use his voice and vote to promote a hodgepodge of concerns, such as open markets, transparency, privatization, strong banking standards, the facilitation of domestic bankruptcy laws, the promotion of burden sharing by the private sector, fostering economic prescriptions that are appropriate to individual economic circumstances, the maintenance of labor standards and workers’ rights, and the recognition of environmental impacts.

An amendment sponsored by Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and Spencer Bachus (R-Ala.), which was opposed by the committee leadership, passed by a vote of 19-15. It stated that before IMF funds could be disbursed, the Treasury must certify that banks and

investors had made a “significant prior contribution” to solve the particular crisis, in the form of debt relief, rollover of existing credit, and provision of new credit. After passage, three Democrats withdrew their support, until language which called for an amendment to the IMF charter was eliminated.

The hearing was characterized by opposition to the IMF on every conceivable ground. The issue is now before the House Appropriations Committee. Sanders and several others have sent a letter to the House leadership saying that IMF funding should not be appropriated until after June 1. The Appropriations Committee, which is preparing a FY 1998 supplemental appropriations bill that includes funding for military operations in Bosnia, is deciding whether to split the IMF funding into two parts, to assure that the smaller amount (\$3.5 billion for the New Arrangements to Borrow) passes immediately.

Work continues on transportation bill

The Senate continued work on the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) re-authorization during the week of March 2, disposing of numerous amendments. Most of the amendments passed dealt with issues such as drunk driving and highway safety, and generated little controversy. One of these added \$25.9 billion to the bill, to bring total funding authorizations to \$175 billion. However, two others, dealing more with social agendas than with highways, generated much more controversy.

On March 3, Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) introduced an amendment to require the Secretary of Health and Human Services to report to Congress

on the number of former welfare recipients who have become “economically self-sufficient.” Wellstone said that, in the wake of the 1996 welfare reform bill, it is important to see whether it is the case that “we are seeing families that are actually becoming more impoverished.” And, if that is the case, he said, “then what we need to do is take corrective action.” He reported that during his travels around the country, nobody he has asked really knows what is happening to the people who are no longer on welfare. Wellstone’s amendment was tabled by a vote of 54-43, mainly because of Republican objections that it was not germane to highways, and that it was “costly and unnecessary.”

The second amendment that caused controversy was one by Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), introduced on March 5, which would eliminate race and gender preference quotas in the awarding of highway construction contracts. McConnell argued that such quotas were already rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court because they subject certain individuals to unequal treatment under the law, and therefore the quota provisions in the bill were unconstitutional. Opponents, such as Max Baucus (D-Mont.), argued that the quota programs give women and minorities “a fair shot at economic opportunity” by giving them “a seat at the table.” The amendment was tabled by a vote of 58-37, after a full day of debate.

On the House side, Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Bud Shuster (R-Pa.) told an audience at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce on March 3, that the House bill would come to the floor in April or May, “within the context of the budget resolution.” He said that he believed that the bill, as he has proposed it, will fit in with the numbers in last year’s budget agreement.