

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

School Vouchers Plan Is Defeated in House

On May 23, the House passed its version of an education reform bill by a vote of 384-45. The bill's central focus is on "accountability," to include mass testing of students in grades 3 through 8. Its provisions also include reading skills improvement programs, incentives for school reforms to improve achievement standards, teacher training programs, continuation of drug-free- and gun-free-schools programs, and holding states accountable for improving schools.

What didn't get into the bill were two amendments on school vouchers sponsored by Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Tex.). The first, defeated by a vote of 273-155, would have allowed students to go to private school if their public school was "low performing" for three years. The second, voted down 241-186, would have provided \$50 million for research projects on the effects of "school choice" on academic achievement. Dale Kildee (D-Mich.) warned that adoption of the two amendments would have jeopardized "the many months of bipartisan work that have gone into producing this legislation."

Compromise Tax Bill Sent to President Bush

President Bush got most of what he wanted when the Senate voted 58-33 on May 26 to pass a compromise tax bill which had been worked out the day before by four House-Senate negotiators, after the Senate had acted on May 24 to pass its original version of the bill. The negotiators were House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas (R-Calif.), Senate Finance Committee Chairman Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), and Sens. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) and John Breaux (D-La.). The compromise bill was re-

leased at 5:15 a.m. on May 26, with the House voting it up 240-154 at 10 a.m., and the Senate a short while later. All of this to get the bill to Bush before Memorial Day, as per his demand.

Most Democrats were extremely unhappy at the procedure that was followed, however. The bill was brought up under the reconciliation procedure, which meant that, under Senate rules, the bill could not be filibustered. The reconciliation rules also required that the tax cuts in the bill have to "sunset" at the end of the ten years. As Rep. Martin Frost (D-Tex.) wryly noted, this means that if you die in the year 2010 and have a taxable estate, you pay no estate taxes. "But if you have the good fortune to live until 2011," he said, "you pay the full estate tax exactly as it is right now."

Other provisions of the bill include across-the-board rate reductions, such as the creation of a 10% tax bracket, expansion of the earned income tax credit, and phased reduction of the so-called marriage penalty. Soon-to-be Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) said that the compromise bill was far better for low-income taxpayers than President Bush's original proposal, which, he said, was "aimed at society's winners."

Gallucci Defends North Korea Framework

Ambassador Robert Gallucci, Dean of the Georgetown School of Foreign Service, defended the 1994 Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea, in testimony before a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on May 23 on U.S. North Korea policy. Gallucci helped negotiate the agreement as a special envoy of the first Clinton Administration.

Gallucci said that, today, all of the

facilities essential to North Korea's nuclear program are frozen and open to inspection, and that "there has been a noticeable reduction in tensions between North and South Korea as well as a significant amount of diplomatic engagement by the North with a number of countries around the world." He argued that as long as the risk of war on the Korean peninsula is being reduced and there is improved relations between North and South, "we should try to preserve the agreed framework so long as we believe it is denying North Korea the capability to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons."

Gallucci effectively refuted the right-wing ideological rantings of Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), who may have made his last appearance as committee chairman. Helms said North Korea is "one of the most evil regimes in this world," and that the regime is responsible for the years of famine there because it continues "to lavish funds on its huge and offensively posturing military." He attacked the Clinton Administration, which, he said, "in its zeal to dispense with the nuclear and missile threat from North Korea and to foster reconciliation with its inhuman and dictatorial regime," ignored the threat of its conventional army "that still looms just over the border from Seoul."

Gallucci was backed up by James T. Laney, co-chair of the New York Council on Foreign Relations' Korea Task Force, who said that his main worry is the "growing concern in South Korea that we are not fully supporting them, and they don't want a return to the Cold War mentality." He said that there is a broad base of support in the South, maybe as much as 80% of the population, for "some kind of engagement policy that continues reducing tension, avoiding war, and finally getting rid of the weapons of mass destruction, maybe leading to a peace treaty."