

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

Senate sustains Bush on Hatch Act revisions

President Bush succeeded in arm-twisting two senators, enough to sustain his veto of the proposed revision of the Hatch Act. The Senate voted 65 to 35 on June 21 to override the veto, two votes short of the two-thirds needed.

The revision would remove many of the restrictions on federal employees from engaging in political activity, allowing them to participate in partisan politics while off-duty, to solicit funds from fellow union members, and to canvass neighborhoods door-to-door for political candidates. The revisions, according to Rep. William Ford (D-Mich.), chairman of the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee, would "give our federal workers some of the basic fundamental rights that the rest of us enjoy."

President Bush claimed that federal workers must be barred from actively participating in partisan politics "to preserve the impartial, evenhanded conduct of government business."

On May 10, the Senate had voted 67 to 30 to override, and then on June 20 the House voted 327 to 93 to override; but frenetic lobbying by White House officials succeeded in getting the Senate to reverse itself. The Congress has so far failed to override any of Bush's 12 vetoes.

Bush administration strong-arms airlines

Robert Aaronson, president of the Air Transport Association, who was scheduled to testify before the House Public Works Subcommittee on Aviation the week of June 19, abruptly canceled his appearance after Transportation Secretary Samuel Skinner telephoned airline executives.

Aaronson had already written a draft of the remarks he planned to deliver where he described Skinner's proposal for a user fee on passengers in order to raise money for airports, as "flawed," according to industry sources cited by the *Washington Post*. Aaronson was also to explain how the proposal was opposed by the airline industry.

According to the *Post* account, the awarding of lucrative new Pacific Rim air routes was used to convince the industry to back off its attack. Skinner and Jeffrey Shane, Assistant Secretary for Policy and International Affairs, said international routes were never mentioned during Skinner's phone calls. One airline official commented, however, "What they did was highly unusual and it was stupid on their part. Sam's Chicago-style politics is such that he has almost no qualms about littering the landscape with twisted arms."

After the calls, United, American Airlines, Continental, and Southwest sent letters to the subcommittee expressing support for the administration's proposal.

House withholds funds for nuclear plant

The House voted 413 to 7 on June 19 to withhold funds for a proposed plutonium reprocessing plant at Rocky Flats, Colorado, until the administration completes a long-term plan for rehabilitating its nuclear weapons program.

The Department of Energy argued that the reprocessing plant would provide a medium-term solution to the problem of handling the nation's plutonium wastes, while it tackles the long-term problem of waste disposal. The new plant would recover plutonium

from nuclear waste and scrap, as well as from decommissioned nuclear weapons. The Rocky Flats plant would replace an aging plant where reprocessing has been halted.

House subcommittee cuts \$828 million from NASA

In its markup of the fiscal year 1991 budget on June 15, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Veterans Administration, Housing and Urban Development, and Independent Agencies, cut \$828 million from the administration NASA request of \$15.5 billion.

Although an increase over the FY90 level of \$12.3 billion, the cuts are slated to come from the most advanced programs. Nearly \$200 million will be cut from the request of approximately \$2.5 billion for the Space Station Freedom. Most of the remaining cuts are from the advanced technology development and mission studies for the Moon-Mars program, which will remain at last year's level, rather than starting to increase.

Hills demands pound of flesh from Mexico

In testimony before the House Ways and Means Committee, U.S. Special Trade Representative Carla Hills said that in return for some kind of free trade agreement for Mexico, the Bush administration was demanding several concessions in return.

The demands included the elimination of the requirement for export licenses for U.S. agricultural exports to Mexico, which are presently required for nearly 60% of U.S. agricultural exports to Mexico; the opening of the Mexican oil and financial ser-

VICES markets to U.S. investors; and the relaxing of curbs on banking, securities, insurance, and transportation industries.

The Mexican daily *El Nacional* called Hills's demands "irrational posturing" which would require changes in Mexico's constitution.

Flag-burning amendment soundly defeated

An attempt to amend the U.S. Constitution to outlaw desecration of the flag was defeated in the House on June 21 in a 254 to 177 vote.

The Supreme Court had declared unconstitutional an earlier measure passed by Congress banning flag desecration. GOPers were prepared to tamper with the Constitution in order to "wave the flag" during their election campaign.

Supporters of the amendment conceded that the issue was not galvanizing the public as they hoped it would. "People have just lost interest back home," said Rep. G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery (D-Miss.), a co-sponsor of the amendment. "There isn't as much interest as a year ago, for what reason I don't know."

Clean Air bill goes to conference committee

The Clean Air bill has been sent to a House-Senate conference committee to resolve differences between House and Senate versions of the bill, which is expected to cost the economy a minimum of \$30 billion per year.

According to Bill Fay, head of the Clean Air Working Group, an industry group which is hoping to slow final passage of the bill, the committee probably won't finish its work until

October. But, he said, he fully expects a final version to be finished by then, after which President Bush could sign it into law before the November elections.

Catholic Reps perturbed by O'Connor's warning

Some Catholic congressmen were disturbed when New York's John Cardinal O'Connor on June 16 warned Catholic politicians that their pro-abortion stand could lead to excommunication from the Church. Excommunication means that a person can no longer receive six of the seven sacraments.

But Rep. Robert Dornan (R-Calif.), a Catholic and pro-life leader, said that O'Connor's words would "make them [pro-choice politicians] think of the gravity of how they conduct themselves in public life."

O'Connor warned that Catholics are at risk of excommunication if they are "perceived not only as treating Church teaching on abortion with contempt, but helping to multiply abortions by advocating legislation supporting abortion, or by making public funds available for abortion."

O'Connor said, "If such actions persist, bishops may consider excommunication the only option."

The Cardinal said this was not only a matter of the Catholic faith, but also of "natural moral law," common to persons of all religions. Of the 133 Catholics in Congress, according to one survey, 39% favor abortion.

Hill told: 500,000 fewer farmers by 1995

A Congressional Budget Office report has informed Congress that there will

be 500,000 fewer farmers in 1995 if real farm income between 1988 and 1995 remains constant. The report embarrassed congressmen from farm states on the House Agriculture Committee to the point that they have reportedly rejected a compromise with the administration on the farm bill and are arguing for higher support payments.

The CBO has had to issue a special memorandum explaining away the significance of the drop, which represents a 21% decline in the number of farmers. The projection was based on taking real income per farm in 1988, and adding in assumptions about where the farm law is going, market factors, and expenses. The report also assumes normal weather and a certain rate of growth of exports.

According to a CBO staffer, the drop in the number of farmers will not present a problem for the food supply, but only for those who are dislocated and for local economies.

Secret documents released on Neil Bush

An Office of Thrift Supervision (OTS) report was released by congressmen on June 19, detailing previously secret charges that Neil Bush, the President's son, and several other officials of the bankrupt Silverado savings and loan violated their financial responsibilities to the thrift and contributed to its failure.

The document recommended that the officials be banned from banking for life; the others agreed to the ban, but Neil Bush decided to fight it. When Bush challenged the charges, OTS officials agreed to alter them and lower the recommended penalty, but he refused the deal. The matter is now under administrative review.