

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

Bush is warned against starting Mideast war

Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Me.), in an interview on "Meet the Press" on Oct. 21, warned President Bush that he cannot unilaterally start a war with Iraq.

"It is important to remember," said Mitchell, "that under the American Constitution, the President has no legal authority to commit the U.S. to war. Only the Congress can make that decision."

Mitchell said that both he and House Speaker Rep. Tom Foley (D-Wash.) were prepared to reconvene Congress, which is about to go into recess, if Bush acts without congressional approval.

In hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Oct. 18, committee chairman Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) warned that he was "not giving advance approval of a U.S. unilateral military action."

Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) released on Oct. 18 a draft joint resolution that would, in effect, forbid the President from ordering a unilateral, unprovoked attack on Iraq without consulting Congress and seeking a war declaration.

Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) warned, however, that military action in the Gulf was "an ominous prospect."

House raises debt ceiling to \$5 trillion

As part of its deficit reduction package, the House quietly inserted a provision raising the U.S. debt ceiling from the current \$3.7 to \$5 trillion.

The *New York Times* reports that the lawmakers hope this will prevent the embarrassing annual ritual of having to raise the debt ceiling just days or

hours before the federal government defaults.

But, as a memo from a U.S. Senator who attended a July White House budget summit noted, the growth of federal debt, from 165% of GNP to 230% of GNP today, now requires \$1 trillion in interest payments annually, after rising \$274 billion in 1989. Two-thirds of this debt is to be rolled over in the next five years.

Outcry provoked over Bush civil rights veto

On the advice of White House Legal Counsel C. Boyden Gray, on Oct. 22 President Bush vetoed the Civil Rights Act of 1990, causing an outcry from civil rights groups and trade unions. Bush claimed that the bill introduces "destructive quotas into our nation's employment system."

The dispute has largely centered on the defenses available in the legislation to employers sued for "unintentional" discrimination. The bill's proponents claim that it essentially would have restored the law of employment discrimination that had been in force for nearly two decades, prior to six recent Supreme Court rulings that made it more difficult for minorities and women to win discrimination suits.

House Speaker Rep. Tom Foley (D-Wash.) expressed his dismay: "I think it is an historic and important redraft of the civil rights of Americans, and I have been hoping up until recent hours that there would be a decision on the part of the President to sign it," said Foley.

Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), the chief sponsor of the bill in the Senate, called the Bush charges of quotas "part of a disreputable tactic to

appeal to public resentment and prejudice."

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People executive director Benjamin Hooks said that the NAACP is committed "to mobilizing its considerable resources to persuade Congress to override the veto." The AFL-CIO took the same stand. Robert Lifton, president of the American Jewish Congress, called the veto "a cruel slap in the face of thousands of African-Americans, women, Hispanics, Jews, and other minorities who are the victims of employment discrimination."

On Oct 23, the Senate failed to mount the number of votes required to override President Bush's veto.

Red China most favored status rejected

The House rejected on Oct. 18, by a vote of 247-174, the recommendations of the President to extend non-discriminatory Most Favored Nation treatment to the products of the People's Republic of China.

The rejection was followed by a resolution which would allow the President to extend conditional MFN status in the next fiscal year if the President will certify that the P.R.C. has accounted for those citizens who were detained or accused as a result of the non-violent expression of their political beliefs during events in Tiananmen Square; released citizens who were imprisoned after detention or accusation; and has made significant progress in 1) terminating martial law throughout the P.R.C., including Tibet; 2) reversing the pattern of gross violations of human rights; 3) easing the restrictions in the P.R.C. on freedom of the press and on broadcasts by the Voice of America; 4) terminating

the acts of intimidation and harassment of Chinese citizens in the U.S.; 5) removing obstacles to study and travel abroad for students and other citizens; and 6) taking appropriate action to promote improvement in the observance of internationally recognized human rights in the P.R.C. and greater opportunities for freedom and democracy in that country. The amendment passed 347-74.

Special funding tucked away for Israel

"Congressional friends of Israel have tucked provisions that could be worth hundred of millions of dollars into last-minute money bills—with little or no public discussion," an AP wire reported Oct. 17.

The pro-Israel lobbyists "know our budget better than we do," a congressional staffer said. Sources who insisted on remaining anonymous said that the two sponsors of the provisions are Sens. Daniel Inouye (D-Hi.) and Robert Kasten (R-Wisc.).

The funds were put into the Defense and Foreign Aid appropriations bills for FY1991. With the provisions, Israel will be eligible for contracts under the Pentagon's Overseas Workload program which provides for local service and maintenance of military facilities. The bill asks the Pentagon "to identify and develop new specialized capabilities in depot maintenance and repair in Israel," and that Israel be given the inside track on maintaining U.S. F-15 fighter planes and converting 400 F-4 aircraft to drones. The bills also establishes a new 4.5 million-barrel strategic petroleum reserve for Israel.

The Pentagon is also requested to award future defense contracts to Israel in areas like Stealth technology, the

Strategic Defense Initiative, anti-terrorism, and helicopter development.

Boren says Bush knew of Iraqi invasion plans

Sen. David Boren (D-Okla.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, and Rep. Dave McCurdy (D-Okla.), ranking member of the House intelligence panel, said that the Bush administration was aware of plans of the Iraqi invasion 30-60 days before the actual assault.

"And three days before the actual assault, we knew it was going to happen," Boren said.

McCurdy said that for two weeks before Kuwait was invaded, he had been reading CIA reports indicating there would be an Iraqi action. But, he said, government "policy makers" were ignoring the signals.

Budget wranglers differ little on tax increases

While Congress and the White House wrangle in marathon sessions to attempt to come up with a budget, all sides are advocating taxes that will hit the middle class and poor.

On Oct. 22, as negotiators appeared to approach a "deal" on a combined package of tax hikes and budget cuts, the agreement seemed to fall apart the next day as Democrats split on whether to accept the Republican proposals on cuts on Medicare and limitations on taxes on the wealthy.

But the Democrats' claim of "taxing the rich" is ludicrous, since they are demanding a mere 33% tax rate as opposed to the Republicans' 31%, whereas between 1960 and 1963, the maximum marginal tax rate on highest-income Americans was 87%.

House Ways and Means Committee chairman Rep. Dan Rostenkowski (D-Ill.) has also proposed delaying the adjustment for inflation in income tax rates, which would mean a tax hike of over \$200 per year for an average family.

On Oct. 21, White House Chief of Staff John Sununu and Office of Management and Budget Director Richard Darman stormed out of the meeting.

Despite negotiations the next day, House Minority Leader Rep. Robert Michel (R-Ill.) admitted that the votes for a package were simply not there. "We've started counting votes and when you're at the margin you have to be very careful. You want to be sure. You don't want this to go down again."

The third emergency spending bill expires on Oct. 24, putting the government technically into default.

Negotiators batter strategic defense funds

Senate and House negotiators reaffirmed on Oct. 22 their decision to reduce spending on the Strategic Defense Initiative and restricted how the money can be spent, despite pressure from the Pentagon to maintain a semblance of serious funding.

The measure prepared by the Senate and House Armed Services Committees and reaffirmed by the panels would provide \$2.9 billion for anti-missile defense, \$1.7 billion below the administration's request. This would be the first time since 1986 that funds for the program have dropped below \$3 billion.

The bill also limits the money that could be spent on development of the first phase of the system.