

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

Civil Rights bill passes, lacks veto-proof majority

The House passed on June 5 by a vote of 273-158 House Res. 1, to amend the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The vote is short of the two-thirds majority needed to override a certain veto by President Bush.

The bill, a Democratic proposal which purports to reverse Supreme Court decisions which have undone civil rights legislation passed during the 1960s, has been a target of Bush. Labeling the bill a quota bill, Bush has played up his opposition as a defense of "impartiality" in job rights. But the administration is again playing upon racial tensions for the upcoming 1992 political election campaigns.

The deepening depression has created resentment among displaced white workers against any legislation which would even appear to give a disproportionate hiring advantage to minorities.

Thornburgh attacked for retaining DoJ post

The decision by U.S. Attorney General Richard Thornburgh to remain in office while seeking the seat left vacant by the death of Sen. John Heinz (R-Pa.) until he is nominated by Pennsylvania Republicans in August, has prompted demands by Democrats for his resignation. Thornburgh said he intends to stay in order to assist President Bush in passing key legislation, in particular, an administration version of an alleged civil rights bill and a new crime bill.

"I think it's very unwise for someone to continue in a law enforcement position while he's an announced candidate for public office," said Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Me.) on June 5. Mitchell said he felt

that Thornburgh should observe the "appearance as well as reality of total impartiality" as attorney general, "free of any political involvement."

Rep. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, said Thornburgh "cannot be a candidate for political office and an appointed public servant at the same time."

The Pennsylvania Senate seat is now held by Harris Wofford, a former aide to President Kennedy, who was appointed in May by Gov. Robert Casey (D) for the interim. Wofford will be running for the post on the Democratic ticket during the special election to be held in November.

Democrats grope for health care reform

Key Senate Democrats, including Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Me.), Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), and Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-W. Va.), introduced on June 5 a bill for a comprehensive health insurance plan which they claim will guarantee that every citizen has health care insurance coverage. The costs would be borne by employers.

While the goal is laudable in a country where 37 million of its citizens lack any form of health insurance and where millions more have insurance coverage which is inadequate to protect them against the costs of serious illness, the proposal is hampered by the U.S. economic breakdown. None of these same Democratic senators has a workable solution to the depression, and therefore they lack the means to guarantee adequate medical care to the entire population. The cost of hospital care has grown to an annual rate of 12.5% of the GNP.

The bill would require employers to provide a health plan for their employees or pay into a state insurance fund in a form of "play or pay" procedure. Businesses with 25-100 employees would be required to "play or pay" after four years of the bill's enactment if fewer than 75% of employees in small businesses not previously insured are not covered. The requirement also applies to firms with fewer than 25 employees after five years.

In the present state of the economy, however, the proposal in the bill for an 8% payroll tax (the price an employer must pay if an employer does not provide an insurance plan for his employees), could place a serious burden on small businesses, sending many into bankruptcy.

GAO report calls thrift cleanup slipshod

The General Accounting Office issued a report on June 10 calling the \$500 billion savings and loan cleanup administered by the Resolution Trust Corporation, slipshod. The GAO report noted that the RTC was unable to keep track of the money it was supposed to be recovering for taxpayers while it sloppily deals out contracts.

House Banking Committee Chairman Henry Gonzalez (D-Tex.) called the RTC "an unguided missile headed for certain disaster," and remarked that the GAO report "makes it clear that the RTC lacks even the most basic controls that would allow it to track and properly value the billions of dollars of assets it holds for the taxpayers."

Senate Banking Committee Chairman Donald Riegle (D-Mich.) added that the GAO finding was "one

of the most serious signs yet that reform is needed at the RTC." "Accurate record-keeping is a key indicator of management ability," said Riegle. "To discover that the RTC's own records cannot pass this simple test is trouble."

Among the instances of slipshod management, in one case the RTC had awarded a contract to manage \$7.4 million in real estate that the agency had already sold. The RTC has also apparently violated its own rules and awarded contracts to companies that have not met requirements to register with the government.

GAO Comptroller Charles Bowsher was scheduled to testify about the RTC on June 11. Bowsher feels that the RTC's inability to measure how much it should be receiving for the assets it is selling could transform potential assets into losses for the agency.

Burton suspects AIDS spread by aerosols

Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.), one of the few congressmen who has expressed concern over the spreading AIDS pandemic, noted that there is still no clarity as to how many ways the deadly virus may be transmitted. In statements on the House floor on June 5, Burton mooted the possibility of the disease being spread by aerosols.

Burton referred to the recent case of a dentist in Florida, Dr. Acer, who had infected at least three of his patients during a medical procedure. The infection occurred in spite of the fact that the virus was not spread in the three accepted modes of transmission, sexually, through using contaminated needles, or through blood transfusion.

"The federal [Atlanta] Centers for

Disease Control is funding a study right now to determine whether the virus can be transmitted in an infected aerosol form," said Burton. "That dentist down in Florida may have given the AIDS virus to other people because of the aerosol transmission of it. We do not know."

The possibility of aerosol transmission was first raised publicly by Lyndon LaRouche during the 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns. LaRouche was viciously attacked by the mass media at the time for exaggerating the danger of the AIDS pandemic.

Burton is calling for a comprehensive routine testing program for the entire population, contact tracing, and constraint for those who continue to knowingly spread the virus.

Bush demands Dems pass legislation in 100 days

President Bush, criticized for lacking a domestic agenda, has lashed out against Congress, blaming them for not passing his crime and highway bills within 100 days of their introduction. Bush had put this challenge to Congress on March 6 when he addressed Congress at the conclusion of his Persian Gulf war.

Bush is to give a speech on June 12 in which he is expected to kick off a campaign against Congress for having "sabotaged" his domestic program. A preview of the Bush message was given when House GOPers held a press conference on Capitol Hill on June 11, all wearing buttons which said "100 days," and attacked Democrats for delaying legislation.

The crime bill, which calls for an expansion of the death penalty and includes an exclusionary rule which would allow the use of testimony in

court which was gained in what was otherwise an illegal search and seizure, is presently stuck in committee. House Minority Leader Robert Michel (R-Ill.) demanded that Democrats allow mark-up to begin on the bill, in preparation for it being brought to the House floor.

Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Me.) called the Bush "100 day" campaign "cynical ethics to make a political point." House Speaker Thomas Foley (D-Wash.) said he thought this development meant that the White House was "beginning the next campaign early."

House votes to restore space station funding

The House voted 363-39 on June 6 to restore funding to Space Station Freedom at a level somewhat below the administration request. Overall NASA funding for FY 92 was frozen at the FY 91 level of \$13.8 billion.

The restoration of funding followed sudden actions to cut space station funding by the House Appropriations subcommittee responsible for NASA on May 15, and then by the full committee. This was even more surprising since the NASA funding had been authorized by the House already on May 2.

The bipartisan nature of the mobilization in support of the space station was underlined when Reps. Jim Chapman (D-Tex.), Bill Lowery (R-Cal.), and Mary Rose Oakar (D-Ohio) circulated a letter on the day of the vote encouraging members to reverse the May 15 subcommittee decision.

Rep. Harold Volkmer (D-Mo.) characterized the spirit of the vote when he commented that the decision to stop funding Space Station Freedom "would be the beginning of the end of the manned [space] program."