

## **Congressional Closeup** by Carl Osgood

### **Medicare Drugs Plan Put Forward in Senate**

On Aug. 1, Sens. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), John Breaux (D-La.), Olympia Snowe (R-Me.), and Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) unveiled before reporters their Medicare reform plan, which includes a prescription drug benefit. So far, the plan only spells out general principles, and Grassley said that a legislative proposal will be developed over the Summer recess, and discussions on it will continue after Congress returns in September.

The plan provides three options for Medicare beneficiaries. Option one is to add a drug benefit to the existing fee-for-service Medicare program, if the individual chooses to stay in it. The second, which Breaux called a "modernized fee-for-service program," combines the part A and part B deductibles and adds greater coverage. The third allows private companies to compete for the right to offer defined benefit packages. Options two and three involve substantial reform of the Medicare system and some significant portion of the \$300 billion reserve fund that was provided for in the fiscal year 2002 budget resolution.

Combining a drug benefit and Medicare reform doesn't sit well with the Democratic caucus, however. Within an hour after the Breaux-Grassley plan was unveiled, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) denounced it as amounting to "robbery, not reform." He said that "it guts the prescription drug benefit" and "it relies on private plans and private insurance companies to deliver a drug benefit." He added that reform of Medicare is a much lower priority for senior citizens who depend on Medicare than is getting a drug benefit. Baucus added that as much of the \$300 billion as possible

ought to be available for a drug benefit and not be diverted into Medicare reform.

### **Congress Adds To Middle East Insanity**

During the week of July 23, Congress added to the danger of Middle East war, by approving sanctions language against the Palestinian Authority by a vote of 381-46. The House and Senate also voted separately to extend the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act for another five years.

On July 24, the House voted up vicious anti-Palestinian propaganda that was written into the fiscal year 2002 Foreign Operations Appropriations bill. The bill came out of the Appropriations Committee on July 10 with language calling for sanctions against the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Palestinian Authority, and there was no attempt to modify or strike it by those House members who have been critical of Israeli actions. The bill, according to Foreign Operations Subcommittee Chairman Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.) who managed the bill on the House floor, says that "the PLO and the Palestinian Authority must abide by the cease-fire recently brokered by CIA director George Tenet."

Kolbe told the House that if the Palestinians don't comply (a determination to be made by the President), then the Secretary of State is required to take at least one of three specified actions: close the Palestinian information office in Washington, D.C.; designate the PLO or one of its constituent organizations as terrorist; or cut off all but humanitarian aid to the West Bank and Gaza.

The provision can be waived by the President "if he determines it is in

the national security interests of the U.S." Kolbe had the chutzpah to say that this provision "strikes a middle ground and sends the right message to the Palestinians."

On the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, the Senate voted 96-2 on July 25, and the House followed a day later with a 409-6 vote. There was very little debate in either house on the bill, and there are several other anti-Palestinian bills on the agenda.

### **Senate Capitulates to Bush on Agriculture Bill**

On Aug. 3, the Senate Democratic leadership threw in the towel on its \$7.5 billion emergency agriculture supplemental authorization bill, and instead sent to the President the much smaller House-passed bill. President Bush's threatened veto of the Senate bill, plus the fact that the House had already left for the Summer recess the day before, emboldened Senate Republicans to continue to block passage of the bill. As a result, Senate Democrats were unable to come up with the 60 votes needed to invoke cloture and move to passage of the bill. Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) then called up the House-passed bill and it passed the Senate by a voice vote, clearing it for President Bush's signature.

Democrats and some Republicans don't consider the issue closed, however. After the House bill was disposed of, Daschle told the Senate that he was "extremely disappointed" that the GOP had chosen "to work against us to provide critical relief to help farmers and ranchers deal with the fourth year in a row of low prices." He accused the White House and the GOP of drawing "an arbitrary and partisan

line in the sand.” Daschle put the Senate bill back on the calendar, leaving open the possibility that it may be brought back to the floor in September.

In the background of the debate, however, was the 1996 so-called “Freedom to Farm” bill, which is up for reauthorization this year. Fears for the future of the “free market” in agriculture underlie the budget concerns expressed by the White House, and by John McCain (R-Ariz.), who complained to the Senate that the continuing supplemental payments, now totalling some \$32 billion over the last four years, are preventing farmers from becoming more “self-sufficient.”

A subsidiary issue is the reauthorization of the Northeast Dairy Compact, which expires on Sept. 30. On July 31, Sens. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and Mary Landrieu (D-La.), representing a broad coalition of Eastern and Southern senators, introduced an amendment to renew the Northeast Dairy Compact and allow other states to enter into compacts as well. They later withdrew the amendment, but it represents a dilemma for Democrats, because it’s a major issue for Sen. Jim Jeffords (I-Vt.), whose departure from the GOP put the Democrats in control, at the same time that it is opposed by Midwestern senators, including Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) and Herb Kohl (D-Wisc.), who represent large dairy interests.

## House Ahead of Senate On Appropriations Bills

The House continued to move ahead on appropriations bills, passing the Foreign Operations bill on July 24, the Treasury-Postal Service bill on July 25, the Veterans Administration, Housing and Urban Development, and Independent Agencies (VA-HUD) bill

on July 30, and the Legislative Branch bill on July 31, bringing to nine the total number of bills that the House has passed.

In contrast, the Senate has moved only five of 13 bills, a far cry from Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle’s (D-S.D.) promise to pass nine of them by the recess. The Senate did manage to complete action of the Legislative Branch bill on July 31 and the VA-HUD bill on Aug. 2. The Senate finished up the Transportation bill on Aug. 1, with the amendment providing for an inspection regime for Mexican trucks involved in cross-border trade left intact. That provision is still drawing a veto threat from the White House, which alleges that it singles out Mexico for special treatment. Daschle noted a letter he had received from ten members of the House Hispanic Caucus signalling support for the Senate provision. “It’s hard for me to understand how anybody could make a charge that this is somehow anti-Hispanic,” he said, “when members of the Hispanic Caucus are on our side.”

Daschle otherwise expressed exasperation with the slow pace in the Senate. He accused Republicans of having chosen to “slow-walk the appropriations process.” This “slow-walk” was especially evident on the Transportation bill, where the GOP forced roll call votes on amendments and forced cloture votes, only to pass the bill by voice vote, including the amendment dealing with Mexican trucks.

## Bush Suffers First Defeat on Nominations

On Aug. 2, the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee rejected, on a party line vote of 12-11,

the nomination of Mary Sheila Gall to be chairman of the Consumer Product Safety Commission. A senior White House official had told Associated Press that Bush wanted to replace current chairman Ann Brown, because she is a close ally of Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.). Publicly, Democrats accused Gall, who has been a member of the commission for two years, of favoring business over consumers.

Republicans responded with anger to the committee’s actions. Minority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) said, “I’ve never seen a case of character assassination worse than this one,” and he indicated that he might suggest to Bush that he make Gall a recess appointment. Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), on the other hand, sees the issue as closed. “The committee has spoken,” he said.

Other nominations received better treatment, however. On Aug. 2, the Senate approved the nomination of Robert Mueller to be head of the FBI by a vote of 98-0. While there was much criticism of the FBI during Mueller’s confirmation hearing, there was little discussion of his own record. Mueller, who supervised the attempt to frame up Lyndon LaRouche and associates in Boston in 1986-87, was allowed to slip away when Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wisc.) raised the issue of political targetting by the FBI.

The Senate confirmed a total of 85 nominations, including two Federal judges and that of Rep. Asa Hutchinson (R-Ark.) to be head of the Drug Enforcement Administration, before departing for the Summer recess. However, Lott admitted on Aug. 3 that one reason that faster progress on judicial and Justice Department nominations is not being made, is because they aren’t being received from the White House. “You can’t be critical of the Democrats for not moving on that,” he said.