

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Chambers Pass Very Different Medicare Bills

Its proponents are calling the passage of Medicare prescription drug bills in both the House and the Senate in the very early morning hours of June 27 “historic,” but some may wind up calling it, especially in the House, another one of those deals struck in the dark of night. In the House, the process for floor consideration of the bill began over night, the night before, when the House Rules Committee took up the 700-page bill and, in what has become usual procedure, blocked all Democratic amendments except for one substitute and one motion to recommit back to committee.

On top of that, accompanying the Medicare bill out of the Rules Committee was a second bill establishing health savings accounts which was, essentially, another tax cut scheme. It came out of the Rules Committee costing an additional \$100 billion on top of the projected, original \$72 billion cost. Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-N.Y.) described it as a “tax break with a destructive purpose: to threaten the traditional employer-based health care by actually encouraging companies to reduce their employees’ health coverage.”

Once the drug bill got to the floor, Democrats denounced it as an attack on the Medicare program. Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) told the House that those who study the bill will eventually realize that “this is the first step that has been specifically designed, not to reform the Medicare system as we know it, but to dissolve it.” Rep. Pete Stark (D-Calif.) was even more blunt. “There is no question,” he said, “that this is a major move toward privatizing Medicare,” because of the extent to which private insurance companies would be involved in determining benefits, which are not otherwise defined in the bill.

The debate on the House bill ended

in a narrow 216-215 vote for passage. The Senate ended two weeks of debate with a 76-21 vote for passage, but the differences between the House and Senate versions are so large that Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) is warning of a long and difficult conference.

Gen. Abizaid Grilled On Lack of Iraq WMDs

Lt. Gen. John Abizaid, nominated by President Bush to replace Gen. Tommy Franks as head of U.S. Central Command, admitted during his June 25 confirmation hearing in front of the Senate Arms Services Committee, that he did not understand why no chemical weapons have been found in Iraq. “It is perplexing to me,” Abizaid said, “that we have not found weapons of mass destruction, when the evidence was so pervasive that it would exist.” This, however, did not keep him from repeating the common Bush Administration refrain that such weapons will be found eventually.

Under questioning from Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.), he also admitted that “I can’t offer a reasonable explanation with regard to” Iraq’s lack of use of such weapons. Reed noted that, because the evidence so far found is at such odds with the pre-war reporting, “we have to reevaluate whether or not intelligence was effectively gauging the intention, the capability or the will of that regime to use weapons of mass destruction, which is a critical question, I suspect, in the calculation to employ a military option.”

Committee chairman John Warner (R-Va.), trying to salvage the situation, tried to suggest that maybe the speed of the campaign and the fact that it did not follow the pattern of the 1991 Gulf War, might have disrupted the movement of chemical artillery shells from depots to units in the field. Abi-

zaid replied that “I believe that if we had interrupted the movement of chemical weapons from the depots to the guns, that we would have found them in the depots. But, we’ve looked in the depots and they’re not there.” He suggested that there was a possibility that the regime of Saddam Hussein either ordered them moved before the war or destroyed, “but I don’t know and I think we won’t know for a while.”

House Reviews U.S. Asia/Pacific Deployment

A June 26 hearing of the House Asia and the Pacific Subcommittee took up the subject of announced, and unannounced, changes in U.S. force posture in South Korea and elsewhere in that region. Subcommittee chairman Jim Leach (R-Ia.) told the witnesses—Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Peter Rodman; U.S. Pacific Commander Adm. Thomas Fargo; and Christopher LeFleur, State Department special envoy for Northeast Asia security consultations—that “it strikes me that from a Congressional perspective, we should delegate to you in the Defense Department all of the niceties of how you think American forces should be structured; but when it comes to commitment that is political and involving both the purse as well as potential loss of life of the United States, we have to be careful about commitment, which is a public responsibility broader than simply the Department of Defense.”

Rodman explained that, with respect to the recently announced force structure changes in South Korea, “What we’re talking about is adapting our physical capability, and that’s something that involves consultation with the Congress necessarily. . .” rather than making any change in political commitment.