

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

House Votes Against FCC Ownership Rule

Opponents in the House, of the Federal Communications Commission's June 2 ruling loosening media ownership rules, have so far been successful in an end run around House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) and Energy and Commerce Committee chairman Bill Tauzin (R-La.), both of whom support the new rule. An amendment added to the appropriations bill funding the Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State and the Judiciary, in the House Appropriations Committee survived, intact, two days of debate on the House floor, and the bill passed by a decisive 400-21 vote. The amendment, sponsored by David Obey (D-Wisc.), specifically prohibits the FCC from expending any funds to license any commercial television station if such license gives the owner access to more than an aggregate 35% of the national audience, as opposed to the 45% allowed by the June 2 ruling.

The House beat back an attempt to repeal the entire FCC package, however. Obey, otherwise expressing sympathy with the amendment's supporters, argued that any effort to repeal the whole package would be doomed to defeat. He warned that if the amendment were to pass, "we will not be able to get enough votes on this bill to demonstrate to the White House that they should not veto the bill because of this provision." He told the House that, even with the committee approach, "we are taking on the media giants . . . and when you do that, you had doggone well better win," and that the FCC's opponents would not win with the amendment.

On the Senate side, meanwhile, Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) and Trent Lott (R-Miss.) announced on July 29 that they would be pressing ahead with their privileged resolution, which repeals the entire FCC ruling, and were

expecting to bring it to the Senate floor in early September. Dorgan said that if their resolution does not pass the House, or if it does and the President vetoes it, "at that point, there's another way to deal with this, and that's to deal with parts of it, and that's what the House of Representatives has done."

Thomas Apologizes for Calling Police on Dems

House Ways and Means Committee chairman Bill Thomas (R-Calif.), in what one reporter called "an extraordinary display," took to the floor of the House, on July 23, to offer his apology for calling the Capitol Police on the Democratic members of his committee during a markup session, on July 18. He told the House that "as a result of decisions made by members of the committee, and by me as chairman, there was a breakdown of order and decorum." He said he agreed with columnist Norm Ornstein, who wrote in *Roll Call* that Thomas' calling of the police was "just plain stupid." He told the House that he had learned a "painful lesson" and that because of his poor judgment, "the stewardship of my party as the majority party of this House has been unfairly criticized."

According to columnist Robert Novak, Thomas' apology came about because the House GOP leadership was worried that his conduct would wind up handing the Democrats a public relations victory. Novak wrote, however, that Thomas is part of a broader problem in the House, wherein long-time Republican members are "still resolved to repay indignities suffered as the minority party. The result is an arrogance that provokes disorder."

Democrats, while praising Thomas' contrition, are still far from satisfied. Rep. Charles Rangel (N.Y.), the

ranking Democrat on the Ways and Means Committee, told the House, immediately after Thomas' apology, the while the majority party has the responsibility to lead the House, and to pass their legislation, "the minority has the right to be respected, to be heard, and to know, in a timely fashion, when that legislation is coming up, to know what is in the bill, to have time, and to be able to use . . . the rules of civility that allowed this body to exist for over 200 years." It remains to be seen whether the Republicans will now try to run the House more fairly.

Head Start Bill Approved by House

On July 24, the House narrowly passed, by a 217-216 vote, a bill to "reform" the Federal Head Start program, including the addition of what Democrats charged was a block grant program. The bill had been scheduled to go to the House floor a week earlier, but the Republican leadership delayed it, apparently fearing that they did not have the votes to pass it. House Education and the Workforce Committee chairman John Boehner (R-Ohio) did say, during the debate, that the bill, "reflects a consensus agreement" among House members on what needs to be done to strengthen Head Start.

One provision of the bill would require all Head Start teachers to have associate degrees by 2005. The block grant provision would give eight states "the opportunity to coordinate Head Start with their own preschool programs," according to Boehner. The most contentious provision, after the block grants, would repeal existing law against hiring discrimination by faith-based organizations that participate in the program.

George Miller (Calif.), the ranking Democrat on the Education and the

Workforce Committee, charged that the bill will do exactly the opposite of what its proponents claim. "It decreases the standards and decreases the accountability, and it weakens our commitment to quality and it asks less of the states," he said. He warned that the states participating in the block grant program will not have to meet the present standards. "Nothing requires a showing that the system that will be created is better than the current Head Start system," he said. Miller offered a substitute amendment to do away with the block grant program, but it was defeated on a 200-299 vote.

Lyn Woolsey (D-Calif.) offered an amendment to strip out the provision on faith-based providers of Head Start programs. She charged that while present civil rights law already allows religious organizations to discriminate on the basis of faith when using their own money, the bill will allow them to discriminate using taxpayers' money. Boehner called Woolsey's amendment "a direct attack on faith-based service providers seeking to participate in the Head Start program." Robert Scott (D-Va.) responded that 8% of Head Start programs are already provided by faith-based organizations, and they provide those services "just as any other sponsor of a Federally-funded program." Woolsey's amendment was defeated by a vote of 199-231.

Veterans' Health-Care Budget Under Fire

The dispute that has been simmering over budget allocations for veterans' health-care continued on July 25, when the House passed, by a vote of 316-109, the Department of Veterans Affairs/Housing and Urban Development appropriations bill. The dispute has its origins in the Fiscal 2004 bud-

get resolution which called for \$15 billion in cuts to veterans' health-care programs over the next ten years. The appropriations bill, while providing \$1.8 billion more for veterans' health-care than last year's budget, was denounced from both sides of the aisle for not providing enough to meet needs.

The bill went to the floor under a rule that did not protect two amendments to add additional funding to the Veterans Administration (VA) medical system. One, by Rep. Chet Edwards (D-Tex.) would have provided an additional \$2.2 billion for the VA and the second, by Veterans Affairs Committee chairman Chris Smith (R-N.J.) would have provided a boost of \$1.8 billion. Both amendments were offered during the debate, and both were struck down on points of order, that they were in violation of the budget resolution. Smith was not present for the vote on the rule, which passed 229-196, though he did vote against passage of the bill, itself.

Louise Slaughter (D-N.Y.) noted that Edwards' amendment would have been paid for by a reduction in the GOP's tax cut for millionaires. "We should not accept the proposition that the government is able to pay for a \$350 billion tax cut for the wealthiest Americans but is unable to fund \$2 billion more for veterans health-care needs," she said.

Stevens Blasts House For Not Funding Firemen

On July 25, in one of its last acts before departing for the Summer recess, the House passed, by a vote of 352-60, a supplemental appropriations bill to provide \$983 million to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), now part of the Homeland Security Department. The bill, how-

ever, fell short of what the White House asked for, what the Democrats felt should be in it, and what the Senate had already passed. In particular, the Senate version included additional money for fighting forest fires and for keeping the Americorps program funded until the end of the year. Senate Appropriations Committee chairman Ted Stevens (R-Ak.) warned before the House vote, "If they leave tonight without giving us the money we need to meet these disaster needs, then I think we're going to have a real, real terrible September."

House Democrats were no more friendly, though few were going to vote against the bill. James McGovern (Mass.) charged that the GOP had deliberately underfunded FEMA in order to meet the budget constraints. "They knew full well that they would have to come back for more FEMA funding," he said. David Obey (Wisc.) questioned whether the funding level in the bill would be sufficient to meet disaster relief needs for the remainder of the fiscal year, "unless we get by with virtually a storm-free Summer, and I would not expect that."

House Budget Committee chairman Jim Nussle (R-Id.), piggy-backing on the Democrats' charge of under-funding of FEMA, noted that the Bush Administration had requested that an extra \$1 billion back in February be added to the fiscal 2003 omnibus appropriations bill, but that that money ended up in other accounts. House Appropriations Committee chairman C.W. Bill Young (R-Fla.) replied that if his committee had been allowed to do its work last year, "we would not have had those kinds of problems, where we had to make adjustments in order to cover the balance of the 2003 issues"—referring to the fact that 11 of the 13 annual spending bills were not completed until early 2003, almost six months into the fiscal year.