

Congressional Closeup by Ronald Kokinda

Bill addresses nursing shortage, ignores AIDS

Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) introduced legislation on June 19, S. 1402, to try to overcome what is becoming an acute national shortage of qualified professional nurses. The bill ignores the role of the AIDS epidemic in creating the shortages.

The Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, which Kennedy chairs, has yet to introduce AIDS-testing legislation. But Kennedy is known to oppose mandatory testing and favor strict confidentiality of AIDS test results. To this extent, Kennedy and like-minded officials share responsibility for creating the very nursing shortage which they now purport to solve, since this policy results in nurses and other health care professionals being unaware of when they are treating an AIDS-infected patient.

The national vacancy rate for RNs more than doubled from 1985 to 1986, from 6.3% to 13.6%, and nursing school enrollments decreased by 17.6% between 1984 and 1986. This coincided with increased concern about the AIDS epidemic. A nursing student at San Diego State University said that of 270 students who started nursing school there last fall, only 90 students remain. The main reason for this, she reports, is the fear that not enough precautions are being taken to protect health workers against AIDS.

Kennedy's bill proposes demonstration projects funded at \$2 million to overcome the more longstanding reasons for nursing shortages, including difficult working conditions and work schedules, and the low pay for career professionals. It also sets up projects to increase the quality of care and recruitment of nurses in home health care and nursing home care, and would authorize \$2 million in funding for these projects. Finally, it

would establish one to five regional nurse recruitment centers targeting 12- to 14-year-olds, high school and college students, and adults, to encourage their entering the field of nursing.

House prepares for campaign finance reform

While Republicans continue to block public financing of campaigns in the Senate, the House Subcommittee on Elections concluded its hearings on House election campaign finance reform on July 14, preparatory to House consideration of the issue later this year.

Elections Subcommittee chairman Rep. Al Swift (D-Wash.) has introduced the "Campaign Cost Reduction and Reform Act of 1987," H.R. 2464, which omits any provision for public financing of campaigns in an effort to make the "reform" more politically palatable.

The bill would limit primary and general election races to \$200,000 each, of which PAC contributions could be no more than \$75,000 each. Candidates would be enticed into such limits by a 30% reduction of radio and TV broadcast costs, a 50% cut in postage costs, and encouragement for reduced print media costs. A candidate participating in this scheme would have no spending limits, and would continue to enjoy these benefits if his opponent chose not to accept the limits.

The National Democratic Policy Committee testified before the subcommittee on July 14, and warned that election reform was another side of the attempt to subvert our constitutional republic with a system of parliamentary democracy. The NDPC warned especially against proposals to strengthen the political parties as the

arbiter of candidate recruitment and issues. "A party bureaucracy working in concert with the financial elite to impose top down decisions puts greater obstacles between the citizen and his constitutionally elected representatives," the NDPC representative said.

Rep. William Thomas (R-Calif.) noted his agreement that the political parties should not be allowed to stifle either minor parties, or political currents within the major parties. Thomas characterized many of the so-called reform proposals as attempts to "tell candidates what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. It's a bribe to get people to accept someone's version of the world."

The Federal Elections Commission testified for a provision observers believe is designed to further attack Lyndon LaRouche. The FEC asked the committee to prohibit fraudulent solicitation of funds. "Contributions which donors believed would benefit a candidate or party were diverted for other purposes," the FEC claimed, without offering evidence of the problem.

House passes NASA authorization

The House passed H.R. 2782 on July 9 by a vote of 372 to 34, providing \$9.522 billion for NASA for FY88, a level \$35 million over the administration's request.

The debate was characterized by statements in support of the nation's space program, and swipes at the stupidity of cutting programs that yield such tremendous economic and technological benefits. There was also concern that the scientific community not be given a back seat as the space station moves forward.

But Rep. George Brown (D-Calif.) summed up NASA's budget problem. "Unfortunately, the committee has tried to fit \$10.5 billion worth of programs into a \$9.5 billion budget," Brown said. Rep. Bruce Morrison (D-Conn.) introduced an amendment to cut \$155 million from the bill, to bring it within the House-passed budget guidelines. Despite the fact that even such avid budget cutters as Rep. Robert Walker (R-Pa.) denounced the budget as having "the most screwed up sense of priorities that ever came down the pike," the amendment got an amazing 148 votes in a 148 to 257 defeat.

The space station received \$767 million in funding. Science and Technology Committee Chairman Rep. Robert Roe (D-N.J.) explained that "the history books will someday report that the Soviets had a permanent place in space almost a decade before the Americans. Let's make sure we don't make it worse."

The bill provided for expendable launch vehicles as well as the Shuttle replacement; funding for the Advanced Communications Technology Satellite; a two-year delay in the Mars Observer mission; the National Aerospace Plane Program which will reach speeds of Mach-25, capable of flying into earth orbit; a new civil technology initiative; and increased funding for aerospace research. Concern was expressed that the European Airbus consortium had taken 42% of the commercial airliner market in the United States last year, and that the United States was losing its edge in the aerospace field.

Ranking Committee member Rep. Manuel Lujan (R-N.M.) expressed concern that NASA was resisting the development of a commercial space industry.

The committee also provided that

during the R&D phase, the space station could take no more than 25% of NASA's budget, and no more than 10% during the operations phase. "NASA needs to keep the science community involved in the development of the space station and not lose sight of the fact that the station is a research facility, not a research program," Representative Lujan warned.

Senate abandons efforts to delay reflagging

After weeks of skirmishing, the Congress has all but abandoned efforts to force a 90-day delay in the Reagan administration's plans to reflag 11 Kuwaiti oil tankers which will provide military escort for 60-70% of Kuwait's oil exports, and provide a military screen around Kuwait allowing Iraq to resume its air war against Iranian oil exports.

The House voted 222 to 184 on July 8 for the 90-day delay, and the Senate on July 9 voted 56 to 42 to keep the delay proposal alive. But supporters of the measure failed three times to muster the 60 votes necessary to break a GOP filibuster.

Sen. John Warner (R-Va.), an administration backer, said he wished "the President had not made the decision to reflag" because it limited U.S. military flexibility in the region. But Warner and other Republicans were determined not to back out of a commitment to which the President had given his word.

Sen. John Glenn (D-Ohio), who traveled with Warner on a fact-finding mission to the Gulf, asked what the link was between defending 11 of roughly 500 ships that sail the Gulf every month and defending vital U.S. interests. Glenn agreed that the oil supply upon which our standard of liv-

ing depends, keeping the Soviets out, and ensuring that Iran does not win its war with Iraq were vital interests, but argued that they should be openly stated.

Glenn warned that oil at Kharg Island "is economic sustenance for Iran," and said that "they have to know absolutely and without fail that we have a retaliatory capability in there that is going to leave them without the ability to prosecute a war if they are dumb enough to hit an American ship."

Chicken game looms on Gramm-Rudman

Congress must pass an increase in the national debt ceiling by July 28 or allow the nation to default on its debt obligations. The game being played on this battleground is an attempt to force the President to accept either a \$19.3 billion tax increase, or the disastrous consequences of automatic budget cuts under a strengthened Gramm-Rudman-Hollings balanced-budget law.

OMB Director James Miller III may have been the first to blink when he told the Senate Budget Committee on July 14 that the administration might accept a relaxation in the deficit reduction goals, but that Congress should also pass the debt ceiling rise without the new automatic budget cutting mechanisms. It would be "dangerous" not to pass a clean debt ceiling bill, Miller said.

While the debt limit will be hit on July 17, House Ways and Means Committee chairman Rep. Dan Rostenkowski (D-Ill.) is scheduling his committee's action based on a last-minute July 28 deadline, when a default would occur. Hearings are not scheduled until the week of July 20.