

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MINORITY WHIP,
STENY H. HOYER

TUESDAY, JANUARY 17, 2012

1:35 P.M.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, there obviously is nothing else going on in town. Thank you for being here. I hope all of you had a relatively restful break and took some time off for yourselves and are back with great expectations. Let's hope we fill at least some of them.

First of all, the mundane, the floor schedule. I think I am correct in saying in January we will meet 1 full day. We will either be coming in at 6:30 or leaving early on Thursday or Friday at 3 o'clock. I think I am right on that. You may want to check.

In any event, we are going in at 6:30. We will have votes at 6:30. We will meet at 2:00. We will have votes, a quorum call, obviously, for the reconvening of the second session of the 112th Congress; swear in the new Sergeant at Arms, Paul Irving, whom I have known for a very long period of time, been very active in the Secret Service. Some of you may recall that I chaired the Treasury-Postal and served on the Treasury-Postal Committee for a long time, which funded, which was the overseer of the Secret Service. He has been with them for some time. I think it was a good appointment. I think he will do a wonderful job for us. He is very professional.

The Rules Committee is going to meet on H.J.Res. 98 which is the resolution of disapproval, which I will talk about in just a few minutes.

On Wednesday, we expect to consider that resolution of disapproval and the last votes will be about 4:00 or 5:00 at the latest. There will be 2 hours of debate likely on the resolution of disapproval. Then we will then break for the week, as we will next week as well,

for the two meetings of the Republican Party and the Democratic Party next week and the Republican Party this week. They will be meeting in Baltimore. I noted a number of stories talking about what they might be doing in Baltimore, Charm City. I don't know how much charm there will be there, but it is Charm City.

Next week we will have the State of the Union on the 24th, and we expect to consider the FAA extension. On Wednesday of next week, the last votes are expected to be at 12:00 or thereabouts, which is what we are going to do this week as well.

Now, let me start with this: 84 percent of Americans disapprove of the job Congress is doing. I am a very strong member of the 84 percent. And the question may have been "or what they are not doing." I want to talk to the 16 percent and find out what they are thinking. The Congress is not meeting hopefully its own expectations for itself, and I think the American public are right to be distressed, disappointed, anxious, angry about the failure of the Congress to address the serious problems confronting our country.

I said around the country over the last 3 or 4 weeks that I believe that America has the resources to solve the challenges that confronts it, both in terms of debt and deficit and other problems as well, if we have the will and the political courage to do so. I am hopeful that we will summon the will and the political courage to confront particularly what I perceive to be the most pressing problem confronting this country, which impacts on all others, and that is the debt and deficit.

I was very disappointed, as you know, that the supercommittee failed either to come to a conclusion and make a recommendation to the Congress, or, alternatively, to extend its life, or at least request an extension by the Congress of its life, which I was for. It did not do that.

I am hopeful that the Bowles-Simpson proposal will be given new life. There are those who are working on substantive legislative proposals to offer to the Congress. I am going to continue to work with the 100 signatories and many others on the letter that we sent to the supercommittee urging it to come to a resolution and proposal for a big deal; that is, a \$4 trillion-plus deal to get our fiscal posture in a way that it needs to be to give confidence to our people, to give confidence to the international community, and to allow us to meet the priorities that the President has put forward in terms of education, in terms of innovation, in terms of infrastructure improvement, as well as other priorities of our country, both domestically and foreign.

Now, we need to be real. The American public expect us to talk truth to them. Unfortunately, the only thing that we have on this week's agenda is a charade, a pretense, an abdication of responsibility. The resolution of disapproval, if it were to pass and to be signed by the President, everybody, I presume, understands would be a very negative thing to happen and would have negative consequences fiscally here and around the world.

Now, the process that was set up, of course, as a number of

Republicans are observing, and I would observe, ensures its failure; the resolution of disapproval will not pass. If it passes the House, it will not pass the Senate. If it passed the House and Senate, then the President would veto it, correctly, and his veto would be sustained. I don't think it is going to pass the Congress. I don't think it is going to pass the Senate, and I hope it doesn't pass the House. I hope there are enough people who are -- I expect the overwhelming number of Democrats to vote against a resolution of disapproval, but I hope we are joined by a large number of Republicans who understand it is not whether you are for or against debt, it is simply whether you are for or against America remaining a responsible payer of its obligations.

So, that will be the substantive business we will do. We have a lot of priorities, but we have one overriding priority, and that is jobs. The President very early in his term, within the first 28 days, focused on legislation to create jobs. In fact, we have some success in creating jobs. We have had positive job numbers over the last year-and-a-half-plus. That is good. We have not had enough jobs. We have dug a very deep hole in the last administration, the worst job performance of any President since Hoover, and therefore we had a lot of work to do.

The President offered a jobs bill in September. We have yet to see it on the floor. I continue to urge Mr. Cantor to bring it to floor or to bring an alternative. Republicans continues to focus on regulatory legislation, which a member of their own party said he hadn't

even heard of in the United States Senate. This is Mr. Graham of South Carolina saying, "I haven't even heard of this bill." And I think they are forgettable. And Mr. Barton, a former Reagan staffer and Bush-I staffer in the administration, said that they wouldn't positively affect jobs. So we need to focus on jobs, and we need to be real about focusing on jobs.

The Republicans did not allow a vote on the President's jobs bill, and when Senator Reid tried to bring it up, they repeatedly failed to give even 60 votes to have it considered. The Democrats were for considering it, putting it on the floor, the most important issue to America, but they couldn't get it up to the floor under Democratic leadership. They tried to bring it up, and the Republican leadership in the House wouldn't bring it up, refused to bring it up.

We need to address jobs. We need to address deficits and debt. I suggest that they are interrelated. My view is that one of the most positive things we could do to address confidence in the economy would be to come up with a big, bold and balanced fiscal plan for the coming decade to get us to balance.

The last session, the first session of this Congress, was, I think, as unproductive a session as I have served in since I came to Congress 30 years ago. USA Today said, "The Republican Party has yet to coalesce around a legislative agenda that goes beyond the basic to-do list."

The National Journal is reported as saying, "Many House Republicans" -- "House Republicans" in brackets because they were

referring to House Republicans -- the sentence is really, "Many arrived brandishing conservative credentials and great expectations, only to see their first year 'tarnished, because we've accomplished little, if anything,' one said."

Mr. Rooney from Florida, for whom I have a great deal of respect, was one of those who observed that not much was done. You have a little sheet on that that perhaps you can refer to.

So we need to focus on jobs in the short term, obviously. I am very hopeful that by the end of this month -- today is what, the 17th, 18th, 19th -- the 17th. Today is the 17th. That means we have 14 days left to go in this month. I would hope by the end of the month that the conference committee could come up with an agreed conference report so that we could adopt the extension of the middle-class tax cut, the SGR and the unemployment insurance, which we fought hard to do in December, and it was ultimately done, but with great difficulty and much angst and much consternation among those who could have been very adversely affected by our failure.

I think that although we have until February 28th -- one of those weeks, of course, we will be gone -- I am very hopeful that we will get this done no later than the February break for Presidents Day and not wait until the last minute. I think that will be disruptive to the economy and not a responsible action on our part.

There are a lot of other items, obviously, with which we have to deal. One is the FAA extension. I'm hopeful that we again don't play political games on the FAA extension. If this is held up by a vote

that the Chamber of Commerce of the United States says ought to be dropped, and that is legislation which will say that if you are absent, you count as a no vote, very few members of Congress might be in Congress if that were the case in their elections. Hardly anybody believes that is a way you can't vote. So if somebody is not in the room, if somebody doesn't bother to show up, or somebody doesn't raise their hand, that somehow that is automatically considered a no vote. That is what this issue is holding up thousands of workers and moving forward at this point in time on the FAA. Mr. Rockefeller believes all other issues have, in fact, been resolved. So I am hopeful that we will get to both those issues in a way that will recognize reality and common sense.

Your turn.

Q Mr. Hoyer, you said you are very hopeful that the conference agreement can be reached by the end of this month, maybe by mid-February. Do you know something we don't know? Has there been progress? Have there been discussions that you are aware of?

Mr. Hoyer. No -- well, there have been discussions. I am aware of discussions. I have myself talked to Senator Cardin, who is a member of the conference, and I have talked to Mr. Van Hollen, who is also a member of the conference.

Q Given the difficulty of moving this bill in December, what gives you hope in January?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think for one thing December's experience should be instructive.

Q In what way?

Mr. Hoyer. That simply pretending that not resolving this matter is sustainable, which I think we saw in December it was not the case, therefore that ought to lead them to, I think, hopefully, a greater inclination to come to an agreement. It won't be easy. What I am really saying, Rich, is that I think waiting until February 28th won't make it any easier. We need to get it done. We need to create confidence in the economy.

The economy is showing signs of progress, positive growth; 212,000 private sector jobs last month, 12,000 lost unfortunately in the public sector, so a net of 200,000, but that is real progress. That is new jobs. You need 125-. That is 75- over what you need. So that is progress.

Q Will Democrats insist on taxing the wealthiest in the country as part of paying the cost for the payroll tax cuts and the other things, or are there other growth proposals that you think you will have?

Mr. Hoyer. Democrats didn't insist on that in December. That is, I think, what we think is the wisest way to proceed, but obviously in the Senate they don't have a majority for that proposition. Senator Reid put that on the floor a number of times and couldn't get 60 votes to move it forward. I am not sure, therefore, that it is correct, Dave, to premise what the Democrats did.

Now, obviously a compromise will have to be reached. I am not going to go into the possibilities. The conferees are going to have to work on that. Obviously whatever we have to do has to be paid for, and we want to see the middle-class tax cut extended through December

31st. We want to see the SGR extended to so that people will have access to their docs, people on Medicare will have access to their docs. And we want to make sure unemployment insurance in this continuing environment of not having enough jobs for the people who want them is extended so that we don't have people falling off the edge of the table.

Q But are there government programs or something you can work on or cite to us that might be duplication? There was something the President wants to do about fees, pensions, that stuff. I am sorry to take too much time.

Mr. Hoyer. Look, I think the President's recommendation in terms of consolidation and reorganization, I think, may save money. I certainly hope it will save money. I haven't looked at it carefully enough to know whether I think it is a proposal that I will fully support. We will see. But I think reorganization, moving in that direction is appropriate, but that is not going to be the funder, I think. There are some very tough decisions that have to be made, and we will see what they do.

Q On the must-pass items in this Congress, they are kicked upstairs to the Speaker and the President and party leaders, so what will you expect to see will happen with the renewal of the payroll tax cut and unemployment insurance extension?

Mr. Hoyer. What I expect to happen?

Q Do you expect the same thing to happen?

Mr. Hoyer. To be kicked upstairs? I am hopeful that the conference committee, in consultation, obviously -- you know, the

conferees, they walk and talk outside of the conference. So they are going to talk to the Speaker, they are going to talk to Mr. Reid, they will be talking to McConnell, they will be talking to Ms. Pelosi. I expect there to be consultation and conferencing or discussions. But I hope the conference works. You know, that is the way the legislative process should work. Republicans talked a lot about that, but, of course, for Congresses past they haven't been willing to go to conference in the Senate, the health care bill probably being the most stark example of that.

But I don't think there is -- you have the relevant players who have jurisdiction and responsibility on the conference committee, an able group of people on both sides of the aisle. I am hopeful they can come to an agreement. I think they will do so in conversations with the leadership.

Q Mr. Hoyer, you sounded a minute ago like you have had some reservations about the President's proposed reorganization of government.

Mr. Hoyer. No, no, no. I just wanted to let you know, look, I haven't really looked at it carefully at this point in time. I am for reorganization. I think consolidation is a good thing. I think that to the extent we can simplify and make more effective the operations of government, I think that is what we ought to do. Those of us who believe government is a positive force ought to make sure it is working as best it possibly can.

So don't take anything from my comment. I just haven't read

specifically. I know there is some controversy about where USTR is going to be, where SBA is going to be. There is controversy about it.

Q What do you mean when you say that December's experience was instructive? Instructive in the sense that something was finally done? The fact it was brinkmanship? The fact that there was trouble on the Republican side of the aisle getting this done? Expand on that.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think all of the above. All of the -- instructive to this extent. I think there was some feeling that somehow on the Republican side that something that the American people very badly wanted done and thought ought to be done and that was important for the economy to be done, that they could pass their bill and walk away.

That was my point on the floor when I said that the Speaker was walking away from 160 million Americans when he refused to recognize us. Now, I was not surprised that he did not recognize us, I understand that, and some of you thought that was theater. If it was theater, it was serious theater. It was about serious things.

Instructive to the extent that I think it didn't work, and I think if I am a Republican, I thought, no, it didn't work, but I think we got pretty much a black eye in that process. We were seen as not unified, and we were seen ultimately as agreeing to something we said we wouldn't agree to.

I think it was the right thing to do. I think moving to get that done by the end of the year was the right thing to do. And I think that if I had gone through that process, I think maybe I don't want

to repeat it. Instructive in that sense.

Q Mr. Hoyer, is it possible to bring in some of the expired tax extenders into this package and maybe not pay for the entire package?

Mr. Hoyer. I think the package is going to be paid for, the entire package is going to be paid for, in my view. I think that -- as you know, I am a big proponent of pay-fors. I voted to pay for the AMT, as you know. The Senate didn't vote to pay for the AMT in the last Congress; not the last session, but the last Congress.

I think the Senate clearly wants to include the extenders, that is about \$30 billion-plus, I think, give or take, depending upon which extenders you put in, and I think that they are going to be looking for ways to pay for those. We have historically said that the unemployment insurance was an emergency and didn't need to be paid for. So from that standpoint, I think we are flexible on the UI. I think there are a lot of Republicans who probably aren't too flexible on not paying for the extenders. I don't know.

The Republicans have, in my view, a somewhat ambivalent position on paying for things. Historically they have taken the view if you are extending a tax cut, that doesn't need to be paid for, although obviously it costs you substantial dollars to do so. So I am not sure what their position would be. My personal opinion is we ought to pay for whatever we put in the bill, with the exception of UI.

Q You mentioned earlier that the first session was one of the most unproductive, I think you said, in your lifetime --

Mr. Hoyer. Not in my lifetime. That is a long time, you know. My service in the Congress, which is slightly shorter than my lifetime, 30 years.

Q You know, after this initial flurry we are going to have here the next couple of months, payroll and highway and FAA, how productive do you think it is going to be here in this Presidential year?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, you know, all of you write, and properly so, that second sessions tend to be less productive than first sessions historically. I think that is accurate. I think, however, my own personal view is, and hope -- and, again, this is a hope, Richard, not necessarily a conclusion -- that because of the seriousness of the challenges that confront us, particularly as it relates to fiscal challenges, that we will have the ability to come together. And I mentioned the group of 100 that signed the letter. It is disparate views, obviously, among the 40 Republicans and 60 Democrats that signed that letter, but all believing that it is necessary for us to act in a responsible and substantial way to put us on a path to fiscal balance. If we can do that, it will be a very productive session. If all we do is allow ourselves to be caught up purely with spin and Presidential politics, then it won't be very productive. America needs a productive session.

Q On an infrastructure bill, you talked about paying for that. So I guess do you think this whole concept of paying for it is going to be a theme with anything you want to do this year?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, pay-for has been a theme of ours since January

of '07 and, frankly, long before that. In 1994, obviously -- I mean, 1990 in the deal, we started to adopt the process of paying for. In 1997 we re-upped. It was phased out in '01, '02, '03 by the Bush administration, unfortunately. So I wouldn't say it is a new theme. Pay-for, paying for what we buy, I think, is a continuing important policy and theme for us.

On the infrastructure bill, clearly the President has made it clear and we support very strongly investment in infrastructure. We think it is critically important. We didn't pass a highway bill. They haven't passed a highway bill. I think the Speaker has made a proposal. I think that is a positive step, that he has made a proposal. The proposal that he has made in terms of additional drilling and the revenues that it would generate I don't think will generate sufficient revenues to do what we need to do in terms of infrastructure. But it is certainly a positive step that he wants to see an infrastructure bill passed, and I am hopeful that the committee can discuss that, Mr. Mica and Mr. Rahall and the Senate as well, and that we can reach an agreement on how to do that, because we need to pass an infrastructure bill. We need to invest in our roads and bridges and transportation systems and our schools, in our information highway, and I think that the recognition of that by the Speaker is a positive development.

All right, thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 2:03 p.m., the press conference concluded.]