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House Passes Budget Resolution

This week the House passed a budget resolution for Fiscal Year 2009 that aims at restoring fiscal responsibility while funding critical priorities for the nation.

The budget champions education, children's healthcare, veterans' healthcare; accommodates tax relief for middle-income Americans; and, provides the funding to strengthen America's security.

Under the resolution, the federal budget would finally be balanced again starting in 2012. In returning to a balanced budget and funding critical priorities, it strengthens our economy and makes America safer.

The House-passed budget rejects the harmful cuts in the President's budget, including cuts to Medicare, Medicaid, environmental protection, LIHEAP, and COPS. It adds \$4.9 billion over Fiscal Year 2008 for veterans' health care; accommodates \$50 billion over five years for the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP); and provides substantial resources over the President's budget for education, and energy efficiency and renewable energy programs.

An overarching feature of the budget is the "pay-as-you-go" rule adopted at the start of the new Congress. It requires that any entitlement spending increases or revenue reductions be offset, so that the bottom line of the budget is not worsened.

The budget includes a deficit-neutral reserve fund to accommodate middle-income tax cuts, such as extension of the child tax credit, marriage penalty relief, extension of the 10% individual income tax bracket, estate tax relief, extension of the research and experimentation tax credit, extension of the deduction for state and local sales taxes, and a tax credit for school construction bonds. A reconciliation instruction in the budget also keeps the AMT – the Alternative Minimum Tax – from ensnaring more than 20 million middle-income taxpayers for which it was never intended.

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Smithfield Closing in Kinston

Upon learning of the business decision made by Smithfield Packing Company to close one of its plants in Kinston, I wrote to Smithfield President Joe Luter to offer assistance to the 476 affected employees.

Every day on the news we are bombarded with threats of our economy easing into a recession. The news of the plant closing comes at a time which makes it especially troubling, and I wanted the affected Smithfield employees to know that they can depend on the support of my office to do whatever we can to provide assistance through our liaison with the Employment Security Commission's Dislocated Worker Program, Congressional Research Service or any other entity upon which we can depend to help them provide for their families.

After my staff engaged in a lengthy conversation with a Smithfield official, I was somewhat comforted to learn of the manner in which Smithfield is handling this sensitive matter. I am informed that approximately 45 to 50 employees will be reassigned to Smithfield's remaining Kinston facility; and further, that company officials feel very confident that nearly all of the other affected employees will be reassigned to your other facilities in Wilson, Clinton, Tarheel and Mt. Olive where Smithfield has a joint partnership.

House Approves New Ethics Rules

The House this week approved Congressional ethics reforms that will establish an Office of Congressional Ethics and help hold members of Congress accountable.

The new House Rule was approved by a vote of 229 to 182 and does not require Senate consideration.

For the first time in history, the rule will permit independent reviews of alleged ethics violations by individuals who are not Members of Congress to ensure that credible allegations of wrongdoing are examined by the Ethics Committee.

The new House rule creates the Office of Congressional Ethics, which will be comprised of six individuals appointed jointly by the Speaker and the Minority Leader. Current members of Congress and lobbyists will not be eligible to serve on the panel.

The panel has the power to initiate investigations of Members of Congress when it deems appropriate. Investigations could only be initiated if supported by a Democratic and Republican member of the panel. At the conclusion of an investigation, the panel would report its findings to the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, known as the Ethics Committee, and recommend whether the committee should review the allegations.

Nationally respected, independent, non-partisan organizations including Common Cause, U.S. PIRG, Norm Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute and Tom Mann of the Brookings Institution support this reform.

The new rules follow the enactment of The Honest Leadership, Open Government Act, which brought unprecedented transparency to lobbyists' activities.

Five Years and Counting in Iraq

Next week American troops will have been in Iraq for five years, and the President continues to indicate a willingness to stay the course.

More than a million U.S. soldiers have now fought in Iraq, leaving nearly 4,000 dead and more than 29,000 wounded in action. The Bush Administration continues to indicate that it will indefinitely maintain U.S. troop levels in Iraq at 140,000. Under the President's policy, there will be approximately the same number of troops in Iraq in January 2009 as there were in January 2007.

While America's troops have made some tactical progress on the ground, the surge strategy has failed to produce the promised political progress and reconciliation. Overall, the situation in Iraq has yet to dramatically improve.

When I visited Iraq in January, I had the opportunity to meet with Commanding General of the Multi-National Force in Iraq, David Petraeus. I agree with General Petraeus that Iraq's problems can only be resolved politically, not militarily. The time has come to strategically withdraw American troops and shift the responsibility of winning the peace to the Iraqi government. Continued open-ended military action is not in the best interest of the United States, the Iraqi people or the Persian Gulf Region.

The responsible, phased redeployment of our troops will enable our nation to make much-needed investments in our military readiness – to ensure that we can project power to protect America whenever and wherever necessary.

As this unfortunate milestone is passed next week, our thoughts and prayers should be with our troops abroad and their families here at home.