

The new Democratic majority - the first 5 months

by Steny Hoyer

As Congress returns from spending time in our districts for Memorial Day, House Democrats are eager to build upon the significant progress we have made over the first five months of 2007 on the issues that matter to the American people - defending our country, growing our economy, protecting children and strengthening families, preserving our planet, and restoring accountability and effectiveness to the federal government.

Democrats' top priority in the 110th Congress is the defense of our nation. One of our first acts in January was to pass legislation implementing the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission. We also passed bills to enhance safety on our nation's railroads and public transportation systems, and to ensure foreign investment in the U.S. remains consistent with national security and prevent another situation like last year's Dubai Port scandal.

Furthermore, we have fought hard to change course in Iraq. By pushing for a responsible timeline for a safe redeployment and benchmarks to hold President Bush and the Iraqi government accountable for making progress, Democrats have brought about a sea change in the debate over the war, and moved closer to ensuring that the Iraqis bear the responsibility for their future.

On the economy, House Democrats have made fair and equal opportunity to realize the American dream our mission. We enacted the first increase in the federal minimum wage in 10 years - and crafted a bipartisan compromise on a package of tax cuts for those small businesses that will be most affected by a minimum-wage increase. We voted to establish justice in the workplace by providing workers with a fair chance to bargain for better wages, benefits and working conditions. And we voted to give corporate shareholders a say on executive compensation packages that too often seem unrelated to performance.

Protecting children and strengthening families has always been a hallmark of the Democratic platform - and our actions in the first five months of this new Congress demonstrate that this commitment is stronger than ever. We passed a broadly bipartisan reauthorization of the highly successful "COPS" program, or Community Oriented Policing Services program, which calls for 50,000 more police officers on our streets over the next six years. Our vote to halve interest rates on certain student loans will put the opportunities that come with a college education within the reach of more families. And by voting to strengthen the federal commitment to stem cell research, we have offered hope to millions of Americans who stand to benefit from breakthroughs in this cutting-edge approach to curing disease.

The House's vote to repeal taxpayer subsidies for oil companies at a time of record profits will free up funding for research and development of cleaner, less-expensive alternative fuels - and represents an important first step toward American energy independence and curbing global warming.

And when it comes to restoring accountability and effectiveness to the federal government, House

Democrats - just weeks ago - passed a lobbying reform bill that will fundamentally change the way business is done in Washington, and clean up the culture of corruption that had begun to emerge over the last six years. Reform leaders praised the bill, which was called "a big victory for the American people" and "a major step forward in addressing the lobbying and ethics scandals that occurred in the last Congress." We have also voted to enact the most sweeping ethics reforms since Watergate, to make earmarks more transparent, and to restore the pay-as-you-go budget rules that brought about balanced budgets and record surpluses in the 1990s.

And in addition to these measures, the Congress has once again embraced its constitutionally mandated responsibility to conduct oversight of the executive branch and hold government accountable. Democrats have already held more than 200 oversight hearings on issues ranging from the war in Iraq, to the firing of eight U.S. attorneys for allegedly political reasons.

What is most striking about our progress is that while Republicans have taken every opportunity to obstruct the people's business, Democrats have kept our promise to run the House in a markedly bipartisan manner. Our "100 Hours Agenda" passed with an average of 62 Republican votes. Democrats have allowed for more open debate on the House floor than Republicans did in the last Congress, for example allowing every member five minutes to speak on the floor regarding the resolution opposing the president's escalation in Iraq. And members are now routinely given at least 24 hours to review legislation before a vote is called.

Democrats will continue to pursue the new direction that voters demanded in the last election. We will continue to fight for a new direction in Iraq. We will finish our work to fund government programs on time and in a fiscally responsible manner. We will continue to see that vital priorities - such as providing health insurance to children who have none, enacting immigration reform, permanently fixing the Republican stealth tax increase (the Alternative Minimum Tax), and pursuing energy independence - are acted upon. And we will continue to pursue policies that reflect the goodness of our people and the greatness of our nation.

Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Md. is the House Majority Leader.

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