

Oil, Ethics, Veterans' Benefits, All in a Day's Work

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This column is going to be written as if I had a blog, which I do not, because I want to share my hectic day with you.

In the last nine hours, I covered, in order of appearance: Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.), Rep. Melissa Bean (D-Ill.), Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas), Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Veterans Affairs Secretary Jim Nicholson, with cameos from other House members.

At 9 a.m., I walked into the labyrinth ballroom at the Washington Hilton. Obama was speaking to the Building & Construction Trades Legislative Conference. The union crowd, I notice, is mostly all-male.

On April 30, this same room will host the White House Correspondents' Association annual dinner, where Cedric the Entertainer will perform and President Bush will speak.

Obama gets a big welcome as loudspeakers play the blues classic, "Sweet Home Chicago."

"We all have a right to organize, together, collectively, for our own economic security," said Obama, a message the crowd wanted to hear.

I cabbled to Capitol Hill, did a quick drop-in at the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee to see Obama on the panel and moved on.

Great Lakes Drill

At 12:45 p.m., in a basement room in the Capitol, I am at a press conference with Emanuel, Bean and Schakowsky, plus two Michigan Democratic lawmakers. The Illinoisans' districts span the lakefront from the Wisconsin border to Armitage Avenue in Chicago. The group tried and failed Tuesday to attach an amendment to the pending energy bill, a sweeping piece of legislation, to ban oil and gas drilling in the Great Lakes. They said they will try again. There are 16 rigs offshore in Michigan.

As it happens, across the hall, the Congressional Black Caucus is having a lunch meeting. I see Obama again and Illinois Democrats Rep. Danny Davis, Rep. Bobby Rush and Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., who is wearing a phone earpiece.

Tom DeLay's tactic

It's a little after 1:30 p.m. and DeLay, perhaps the most controversial member of the House at the moment, the subject of intense scrutiny because of alleged ethics lapses, is having what is called a "pen and pad" session with reporters. That means no cameras are allowed. About 46 journalists show up -- for the most part, the regulars who cover Congress.

DeLay said he only wants questions about the legislative agenda.

"Just a little friendly reminder," said DeLay, drinking from a can of decaffeinated Diet Coke. The pen and pads, he said, are to discuss his role and The Agenda. I take that as an implied threat

that he may not hold these briefings if the outcome is stories about his ethics woes. The assembled press was mainly compliant.

There are a few questions to DeLay about the Ethics Committee, a back-door way of trying to get into the matter of the allegations concerning overseas travel and other issues that have been dogging him.

(The panel, until Wednesday -- after the pen and pad -- was inactive because of a deadlock over rule changes made by the Republicans, which played to DeLay's advantage. In the afternoon, the Republicans on the committee said they were going to investigate DeLay.)

I find it interesting that DeLay emphasized that the Ethics Committee changes were done by House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.). That stuff is "the responsibility of the speaker," he said.

Sitting next to DeLay is House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Joe Barton (R-Texas), who came to talk about that pending energy bill.

Barton said there will be a vote soon on the bill, but don't expect the legislation to provide any relief from rising gas prices. I ask Barton why not advise people to drive less. "If you want to tell them that, go ahead. I want to be re-elected," Barton said. On the way out, I ask Barton if he will support a federal ban on Great Lakes drilling. He told me he will not.

Vets Affairs

It's 3:45 p.m. and I head to Durbin's office. Durbin and Obama have chewed out Nicholson, the new Veterans Affairs secretary, for not moving fast enough on reports (broken in the Sun-Times) that Illinois' disabled vets are shortchanged in their benefits. I see Nicholson on the way in.

Obama and Durbin hold a briefing for reporters afterward. Nicholson told them an inspectors general report will be done in the next few days, but it may be as much as a month before it is released. They want him to speed it up.

It's after 6 p.m. and I better file this right away. If this was a real blog, I would update you after Obama delivers a speech at 9 p.m. marking the 40th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act. I'll be there.