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Why Wyden?

When he was first elected to the U.S. Senate in 1995, Oregon Democrat Ron Wyden pledged to his constituents that he would hold a town hall meeting in every county of Oregon, every year that he served as senator. Visiting with his constituents in all 36 of Oregon's counties every single year is a steep commitment. Yet Wyden has been as good as his word, and as of the first of June had attended 773 town hall meetings in every part of Oregon, from the deserts of the east to the rugged Pacific coast.

Oregon is not only diverse in landscapes; its politics have long pitted the liberal Democrat interests of Portland and Eugene against the conservative ranchers and farmers who populate much of the rest of the state. Whatever outsiders may think, Wyden has obviously found a recipe for winning statewide elections. He has served in the Senate for 21 years, and as of this writing his seat appears safe for this fall. Yet his constituents — both liberal and conservative — should ask themselves, "Why Wyden?" And their answer should be based on a good understanding of how he actually votes in Washington, not just his rhetoric.

Unlike many of his higher-profile Senate colleagues, Wyden is not generally a household name outside of Oregon and the Beltway. But the man characterized by the political information website On the Issues as a "hard core liberal," and who, for the current Congress, has earned a measly seven percent rating on The New American's Freedom Index, has contributed enormously to the advancement of nearly every modern liberal cause, from socialized medicine to same-sex "marriage." While Wyden characterizes himself as "an independent voice for Oregonians and the nation," only seldom in his long political career has he deviated significantly from liberal Democratic orthodoxy.

Ronald Lee Wyden was born in 1949 in Wichita, Kansas, to parents who had fled Nazi Germany. He grew up in California and was an accomplished athlete, attending UC-Santa Barbara on a basketball scholarship before finishing his undergraduate work at Stanford in 1971. Three years later, he earned his JD from the University of Oregon School of Law, and decided to become an Oregonian permanently.

Wyden now lives in Portland, and has a total of five children, two of whom are from his first wife. His current wife, Nancy (née Bass), is a co-owner of Manhattan's famous Strand Bookstore.

In 1980, when he was just 31, Wyden ran for the House of Representatives for the first time and was elected in Oregon's heavily Democratic Third District for the first of seven straight elections. He was still serving there in 1995 when Oregon Republican Senator Bob Packwood resigned in the second-most notorious Washington sex scandal of the '90s. Wyden decided to run for the open seat, and narrowly defeated his Republican rival Gordon Smith for the Senate seat he has held ever since.

Wyden has served in a number of leadership capacities in Congress, including most recently as chair of the Senate Finance Committee from 2014 to 2015, and ranking minority member from 2015 to the

present. He is also the ranking member of the Finance Committee's Subcommittee on International Trade, Customs, and Global Competitiveness.

Over the last 21 years, Wyden has seldom broken ranks with the Democratic establishment, but those occasions when he has done so are noteworthy. On "free trade," for example, he was one of only a handful of Democrats to vote in favor of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in 2005. In 2006, he was one of only 10 senators who voted against reauthorization of the Patriot Act, and in March of 2013, he joined Republican Senator Rand Paul's filibuster to block voting on the confirmation of John Brennan as director of the CIA. Wyden, who opposes the use of drones against American citizens, said at the time, "Mr. President, what it comes down to is every American has the right to know when their government believes that it is allowed to kill them."

Diehard Leftist

Such exceptions aside, Wyden can usually be found at the forefront of whatever radical social or economic agenda item the Democratic Party is pushing. Case in point: Way back in 1995, Candidate Wyden became the first Senate candidate (and, after his election, senator) to publicly support same-sex "marriage." He was one of only 14 senators to oppose the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996, a radical stance for a bill that was passed overwhelmingly by both houses and signed into law by Democratic President Bill Clinton. So ardent an advocate of homosexual rights has Wyden been that he actually appeared in the Senate two days before undergoing surgery for prostate cancer in December 2010 to vote in favor of the repeal of the military's longstanding "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy regarding homosexuals in uniform. That these positions seem positively mainstream by today's political standards is a testament, not to Senator Wyden's foresight, but to the degree to which America has embraced the most radical elements of the leftist program over the course of a single generation.

Wyden is also one of the most pro-abortion members of Congress, as attested by his vote against the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003 — an act that was signed into law by President George W. Bush. He has also voted repeatedly in favor of federal funding for fetal stem-cell research. On August 3, 2015, Wyden voted against a motion to advance S. 1881, a measure that would have cut off federal funding for Planned Parenthood in the wake of revelations that the abortion provider actually traffics in human body parts "harvested" from aborted fetuses. Small wonder that Wyden consistently receives near 100-percent favorable ratings from the pro-abortion groups NARAL and Planned Parenthood, and a near zero rating from the National Right to Life Committee.

On gun rights, Wyden is among the most consistent enemies of the Second Amendment in Washington. He voted to renew the infamous "assault weapons ban" enacted in 1994, which expired 10 years later. He is also in favor of essentially unlimited liability for firearms dealers and manufacturers, and has pushed for stricter background checks for gun purchases.

One of his long-standing signature issues being socialized medicine, Wyden has been a supporter of ObamaCare, although he has at least given lip service to a more free-market (but withal unconstitutional) approach to government-controlled healthcare. In 2009, Wyden sponsored the Healthy Americans Act, which would have created a nationwide network of "private" insurance overseen by the federal government, a less in-your-face version of the nationalized healthcare legislation that ultimately went into effect. In 2011 and 2012, he attracted negative scrutiny from fellow Democrats, including President Obama, for working with Congressman Paul Ryan to try to develop a semi-privatized version

of Medicare. But having failed to institute his own version of socialized medicine, Wyden has become a fervent partisan supporter of ObamaCare, and has opposed efforts to reform or abolish it. For example, in April 2015, Wyden voted against an amendment to H.R. 2 (the Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act of 2015) that would have ended the hated "individual mandate" component of ObamaCare that requires all Americans to have health insurance, or be subject to hefty penalties.

Couple of Inconsistencies

In foreign policy, Wyden's record has been more of a mixed bag. To his everlasting credit, he was one of 23 senators to oppose authorization of military force in Iraq in 2002. At the time, he made the following comments on the floor of the Senate:

Saddam Hussein is the bad actor here and the United States of America is the good actor. I believe the authorization of a unilateral preemptive military attack based on the information now available will cause much of the world, unfortunately, to lose sight of this reality. This perception in a region racked by poverty and already marked by a deep mistrust in American foreign policy could foster decades, possibly even centuries of undeserved hatred of our great Nation that will threaten our children and our grandchildren.… I reached the conclusion that pursuit of a first-strike war, absent any credible sign Saddam Hussein is preparing to wage war against our Nation or other nations, will leave this Nation less secure than before.… It is the sacred duty of the Senate to focus and act upon the long-term interests of our beloved Nation. Saddam Hussein is an extremely dangerous and extremely despicable man. Time and again, he has demonstrated that to his enemies, as well as his own people. He lives in a part of the world where there is no shortage of dangerous and despicable men who pose a threat to the security of the United States. In my service on the Senate Intelligence Committee, I have not seen satisfactory evidence he is any more despicable than the threat presented by Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran.

While Wyden's misgivings proved portentous, his position on American interventionism appears to have been motivated more by partisan loyalties than by principled opposition to foreign entanglements. When fellow Democrats Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton resolved to launch an offensive war against Libya in 2011 to oust another odious Middle Eastern tyrant, Senator Wyden gave them his support, calling the Libyan Civil War a "humanitarian crisis." He stressed that he was supporting the "international effort" — which is the real issue. For Big Government cheerleaders such as Wyden, unilateral United States warmongering, as in Iraq in 2003, is viewed as reprehensible — but war waged with the imprimatur of the UN or NATO is acceptable, because it strengthens the precedent for the coalescing military arm of global government. As for Iraq and Libya, the outcomes have been virtually identical, despite differing means. Both countries had their tyrannical rulers ousted by foreign military powers and have since descended into sectarian and tribal turmoil, with robust factions of both al-Qaeda and ISIS wreaking havoc on the ground and launching terrorist actions beyond their respective borders. The fact that Iraq's Saddam was deposed primarily by a U.S. invasion and Libya's Gadhafi by an international coalition has made no difference to the wretched citizens in Benghazi and Baghdad, who are alike caught in the anarchic aftermath with no resolution in sight.

Passifying Possible Opponents

Wyden's stances on environmental issues have been somewhat contradictory. Wyden is, after all, from a

state where logging and spotted owls are hot-button concerns, and, although he certainly is much more radical environmentalist than not, he has adroitly managed to placate his constituents by taking a more nuanced approach to environmental issues that affect Oregonians directly. For example, Wyden's "Eastside Forest Plan" in 2009 sought to forge a compromise between logging interests and environmentalists determined to preserve old-growth conifer forests in the eastern Cascades. The plan contemplated doubling the amount of timber harvested from six National Forests in the Cascades — but imposed significant restrictions on loggers, such as requiring that only trees with trunks less than 21 inches in diameter be cut. On the other hand, Wyden voted against funding for more roads in national forests, in both 1997 and 1999 — roads that would, of course, give lumber companies access to more timber.

Wyden also cosponsored a resolution at the UN's 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, a resolution that urged the support of Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration on the Environment and Development, as well as efforts to combat alleged global warming and support renewable energy resources. The resolution was a radical environmentalist's wish list, and Wyden's cosponsorship places him in the ideological company of eco-extremists everywhere. In recognition of this, the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) has awarded Wyden with an 89 percent approval ranking.

Nor has Wyden's environmental ardor diminished with the passage of time. Last November, Wyden gave his support to a pair of environmental initiatives aimed at vastly increasing the illegitimate regulatory authority of the federal government in the name of environmental protection. The first of these, the Joint Resolution S.J. Res. 22, expressed Senate disapproval of the recently submitted "Waters of the United States" (WOTUS) rule, which would expand EPA authority to virtually any body of water larger than a mud puddle; although the resolution passed on a November 4 vote, Wyden opposed it. On November 17, the Senate voted on the Joint Resolution S.J. Res. 24, which would express disapproval of and nullify the EPA's "Carbon Pollution Emission Guidelines for Existing Stationary Sources: Electric Utility Generating Units," promulgated last October. These guidelines set differing carbon emissions guidelines for each state, along with reductions goals by 2030, a set of mandates that would amount to yet another crippling layer of regulations to be imposed on homes and businesses, all in the name of combatting global warming. Once again, the measure passed the Senate, and once again, Wyden voted against it.

On trade, Wyden has generally come down on the side of the internationalists who favor dilution of American sovereignty in order to facilitate the rise of regional trading blocs. As we have noted, he supported CAFTA (in 2005), and he also supported the ratification of NAFTA a decade earlier. Last year, he also sided with a majority of senators to extend Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) to President Obama. TPA enhances presidential negotiating authority for trade agreements, and greatly increases the likelihood that the United States will be committed to sovereignty-sapping trade agreements such as the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership and other regional trading blocs.

On fiscal and economic issues, Wyden's record has been inconsistent. In the matter of the gargantuan bailouts passed during both the Bush and Obama administrations in response to the Great Recession, for example, Wyden opposed Bush's bailout but supported Obama's. Wyden stands out among his Democratic colleagues for having a less ravenous appetite for raising taxes, but his opposition seems to be based more on perceived inefficiencies in the existing tax system than dislike of taxes on principle. This is why, on the one hand, Wyden has championed lowering capital gains tax rates (a highly unusual

posture for any elected Democrat), reforming estate taxes, banning Internet taxes, and even requiring a three-fifths majority vote to raise taxes — but voted against the Bush tax cuts of 2001 and 2003.

Tax and Spend; Spend and Tax

Despite his occasional fits of fiscal prudence where taxation is concerned, Wyden is as much a devotee of Big Government spending as any of his liberal Democratic colleagues. Last October 30, a date that will surely be remembered as one of the most shameful in America's fiscal history, the Senate voted in favor of H.R. 1314, which suspended the national debt limit entirely until March 15, 2017, and provided for the reinstatement of a debt limit equaling whatever the debt happens to be at that time. This legislation is blameworthy on many counts: It represents perhaps the final congressional abdication of fiscal responsibility that saw first the abandonment of regular federal budgets and their replacement with a series of haphazard "continuing resolutions" to keep the government funded every time money ran out. Since 2007, the federal government has been run almost entirely on such resolutions, for which the only restraint on spending was the "debt ceiling." Now, Congress refuses even to submit itself to that authority, and, with H.R. 1314, managed to emancipate itself from all remaining checks on its own profligacy. Senator Wyden was one of 64 Senators who helped to pass H.R. 1314.

Senator Ron Wyden has proven enduringly popular with his Oregon constituency, but his long tenure in the Senate — likely to be increased by another six-year term this fall, if polling data has any reliability — has been as calamitous for constitutional limited government as it has been serendipitous for the radical Left. Wyden has long staked out radical positions on social issues such as same-sex "marriage" far to the Left of most of his colleagues, and must be accounted one of the chief legislative moving forces for the advancement of the modern counterculture. Like his colleagues (including many establishment Republicans), Wyden is a reliable internationalist, environmentalist, and all-around big spender. Though he markets himself as a deal-maker and conciliator, his record has mostly been of deals that significantly advance the Left's social and political agenda. If the United States is ever to return to some semblance of fiscal sanity and limited constitutional government, the likes of Ron Wyden will need to be shown to the electoral exit someday soon.

Photo of Sen. Ron Wyden: AP Images

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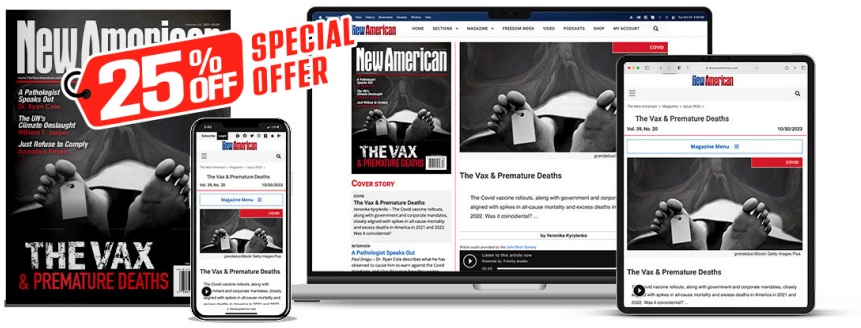

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