



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on December 28, 2009

Deficit “Hawks” Face Hypocrisy Charge

"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds," poet-philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in the 19th Century. Small minds, at least those belonging to the ruling class in Washington, D.C., have broadened considerably since then. Senate Republicans, for example, may often be foolish on the subjects of taxing and spending. But at least two dozen of the current crop of GOP Solons have insulated themselves against any suspicion of consistency.



True, all Republican members of the Senate have resolutely opposed the Democrats' bill for health care reform, forcing the majority party to pass the measure on Christmas Eve without a single Republican vote. In opposing the bill, Republicans argued that it would, among other things, add to the soaring annual deficits and the national debt. But 24 of those Republican Senators voted six years ago for the addition of a prescription drug benefit that former President George W. Bush championed, without any additional revenue to pay for a program that would add hundreds of billions to our national debt.

Congress passed the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003 on December 8 of that year. By that time our nation had been at war in Afghanistan for a little over two years and was a mere 10 months into the "cakewalk" that has turned out to be a very long and expensive war in Iraq. Six months earlier, the Bush administration projected a deficit of \$475 billion — at the time the largest in our nation's history — for fiscal year 2004. Yet the Republican president was vigorously promoting, and the Republican Congress passed, an expansion of the Medicaid program that would add as much as \$400 billion to the national debt over ten years according to that year's congressional budget resolution — a projection that, it was soon discovered, was far too low.

Bruce Bartlett, a Treasury Department economist during the Reagan administration, recalled in a recent *Forbes* magazine article that the Bush administration knew the figure was too low because Medicaid's actuary had concluded, long before the bill was passed, that the ten-year cost of the program would more likely be \$534 billion. The actuary, Richard Foster, later revealed that Republican appointee Tom Scully, Foster's superior at the Department of Health and Human Services, warned him he would be fired if he disclosed the higher estimate.



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How could our public officials, especially those of the party that still claims to be the champion of fiscal conservatism, have been so irresponsible? Because at that time, "it was standard practice not to pay for things," said veteran Republican Sen. Orin Hatch of Utah, according to an article appearing on the Townhall.com website on Sunday. "We were concerned about it, because it certainly added to the deficit, no question," Hatch admitted. Yet he continues to defend his vote for the benefit, because it "has done a lot of good."

In other words, Hatch claims it is defensible for a United States Senator to cast votes that may well bankrupt the country, as long as the programs the Senator supports do "a lot of good" along the way. And, since there is no more constitutional authority for Congress to provide drug benefits for constituents than there is to provide a more general health care insurance, Hatch apparently reads the powers delegated to the Congress under the Constitution to mean, "Congress shall have power to do anything Congress believes will do a lot of good."

Sen. George Voinovich, Republican of Ohio, concedes the Democrats "can legitimately raise that issue" of hypocrisy in the Republican deficit alarm, but he still defends his vote on the prescription drug bill, saying the economy is in worse shape now and Americans are more anxious, Townhall reported. Voinovich apparently believes it's okay to spend money we don't have on programs for which there is no constitutional authority whenever the economy is not faring too badly and the public appears not to be anxious.

"Other lawmakers who voted for the 2003 Medicare expansion," Bartlett noted, "include the Senate's top three Republican leaders, all sharp critics of the Obama-backed health care plans: Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, Jon Kyl of Arizona, and Lamar Alexander of Tennessee." Other prominent "conservatives" who voted for the measure include Republican Senators Jim Bunning of Kentucky, John Cornyn of Texas, and Jeff Sessions of Alabama. Ironically, only eleven Democratic Senators voted in favor of the prescription drug benefit, described at the time as the largest expansion of the welfare state since Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

But that was then and this is now, explains Sen. Olympia Snowe of Maine, another Republican opposed to the Democrats' health care "reform," despite her earlier support of the Medicare expansion.

"Dredging up history is not the way to move forward," said Snowe, generally regarded as among the more "progressive" of Senate Republicans. Besides, she fought unsuccessfully to offset some of Bush's deep tax cuts. Now the situation is different, Snowe said, "because "we're in a tough climate and people are angry and frustrated."

Apparently the only way the people can stop Congress from spending recklessly and creating the economic conditions that leave us angry and frustrated is to stay angry and frustrated. Perhaps that will be the permanent role of the Tea Party movement.

Photo of Sen. Mitch McConnell: AP Images



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