



Government on (Prescription) Drugs

The New Hampshire Sunday News of January 3 of this year ran a front-page feature story on the state's senior U.S. Senator, Judd Gregg, the "deficit hawk." But those paying close attention may have a hard time reconciling such a description of the Republican solon after his 17 years thus far in the Senate.



In fact, it would be accurate to say that Gregg realizes that the way to win recognition and honors in politics is to ignore the deficits and "bring home the bacon." Bacon is the breakfast food that has helped Sen. Gregg get buildings at two universities and a bridge to somewhere in Manchester named after him, along with an honorary degree from Saint Anselm College in Manchester after "Dr." Gregg obtained several million U.S. taxpayers' dollars to create the New Hampshire Institute of Politics at Saint Anselm College, where the monks of the order of Saint Benedict give their prayerful thanks daily for Sen. Gregg and his fiscal "-conservatism."

The son of a New Hampshire Governor, who has also served two terms as Governor along with five terms in the U.S. House, Gregg knows how the political game is played. Gregg, who is not seeking a fourth Senate term this year, knows that however much constituents may applaud his paeans to fiscal conservatism, the folks back home want that good, Grade-A "bacon." They only deplore bacon, calling it "pork," when it goes to other states and other districts. It is a distinction worthy of *Safire's Political Dictionary*. But the late William Safire, a frugal New York journalist, had no entry for "Bacon." Only "Pork."

Republican vs. Democrat

Many congressional Republicans tend to vote more conservative when they are opposing the policies of a big-government Democrat like Obama or Clinton, as compared to when the President is a Republican like George W. Bush, who also recommended big-government programs and lobbied for GOP support. But Gregg may be credited with being more consistent than many of his fellow Republicans in this regard, based on his ratings in "The Freedom Index," this magazine's congressional scorecard based on the U.S. Constitution. In the last Congress (for the years 2008-2009), when George W. Bush was still in the White House, Gregg's Freedom Index score was 53 percent. For 2010, with Obama in the White House, his score is little changed, 51 percent.

Other Republicans were less consistent — voting for the \$700 billion TARP bailout in 2008 but voting



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against releasing the second half of the bailout funds in 2009, for example (Gregg voted for the TARP bailout both times).

This year, to their credit, none of the current crop of Senate Republicans voted for the Senate version of healthcare reform that was passed on Christmas Eve. They all said “Bah! humbug” to the Democrats’ claim that through a combination of taxes and cuts elsewhere in the budget, the bill would not add to the massive deficits that are coming down the road. But at least two dozen of them, not including Sen. Gregg, voted in December of 2003 for President George W. Bush’s prescription drug benefit add-on to Medicare, without even a pretense of paying for the program that would add, by a conservative estimate, about half a trillion to the national debt over 10 years. It is sometimes amazing how quickly those old horse-and-buggy Republicans can turn into limousine liberals when votes, especially of the elderly, are up for grabs.

And they probably didn’t learn much, either, from witnessing the futility of trying to “whip” inflation by having people walk around with WIN (Whip Inflation Now) buttons on their coats. That was Republican President Gerald Ford’s answer to the economic woes he inherited in the middle ’70s. But each new administration promises to be different. That is why “new” is like youth — “a prodigal in promise now, a miser in fulfilling.”

Bush’s Binge

But, of course, George W. Bush was a *Republican* President, and many of his fellow Republicans in Congress carried water for him that they will not carry for a Democrat President, as they did for President Bush’s prescription drug add-on to the Medicare program. Yet ironically, conservative Republicans opposed Medicare when Lyndon Johnson’s overwhelmingly Democratic Congress passed it in 1965 when both deficits and inflation were low — even minuscule — compared to the trillions in red ink threatening this and future generations.

Congress passed the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003 in December 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 10 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 10-year cost of the program would more likely be \$534 billion. But the actuary, Richard Foster, later claimed 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, more accurate estimate to Members of Congress.

So here we are again. Our elected representatives were deceived. Bad intelligence, it was. But you can’t say that Tom Scully was responsible for the fiscal chaos we now endure. No, Congress has had plenty of warnings from other sources about the consequences of its hyper-profligacy, including the well-chosen words of the Comptroller General of the United States, the nation’s top accountant. David Walker held that post under President Bush from 2001 to March of 2008. Perhaps he was out of circulation when



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Congress was considering the prescription drug benefit. Maybe Bush had sent Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to look for him amid the “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq. But Walker had much to say about our fiscal policy and the danger it poses.

“I would argue that the most serious threat to the United States is not someone hiding in a cave in Afghanistan or Pakistan, but our own fiscal irresponsibility,” Walker said in an interview for the CBS program *60 Minutes* in 2007. Recall that by that time the Bush administration had already squandered nearly a trillion dollars in a war over apparently non-existent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the hunt of terrorists in caves in “Af-Pak” land.

We are not just back to where we were when billionaire H. Ross Perot was sounding the alarm about deficits in 1992. We are a whole lot deeper in debt and the annual deficits facing us are larger and larger — in the magnitude of \$1.5 trillion per year. This is barely a decade after President Clinton, working with a Republican Congress, was able to announce that the deficit was zero. Even allowing for creative bookkeeping (which occurred then, just as it does now), there is still no denying that the United States was far closer to solvency — and thus economic, social, and military security — under the last Democratic administration than we were under the leaderless, government-by-crisis Republican administration of George W(astrel) Bush.

Reluctant Republicans

And where were the “deficit hawks” in Congress? Unable to see the elephant in the room, they were singing Hoover-like hymns to security and -prosperity.

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. Orrin Hatch of Utah, according to an article appearing on the Townhall.com website. “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 healthcare 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 over 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.com 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 11 Democratic Senators voted in favor of the



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prescription drug benefit, described at the time as the largest expansion of the welfare state since Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. All but 16 Democrats in the House voted against it.

Other "conservative" Senators aboard the "Lyndon Baines" Bush prescription-drug gravy train were Sam Brownback of Kansas; Christopher "Kit" Bond of Missouri; Richard Shelby of Alabama; Larry Craig of Idaho; Saxby Chambliss of Georgia; Chuck Grassley of Iowa; Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania; Democrat Ben Nelson of Nebraska, the Senate's leading holdout for handouts; and too many others to name individually.

House members who jumped on the pork-barrel prescription-drug bandwagon included John Boehner, then the House Majority Leader and... well, what else do you need to know? As John F. Kennedy said during his 1960 campaign for President, anyone who has ever been to the circus knows what the elephants do: "They grab the tail of the elephant in front of them."

But that was then and this is now, explains Sen. Olympia Snowe of Maine, another Republican opposed to the Democrats' healthcare "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."

Oh, yes. And the Obama administration will bear the brunt of it. For while Barack Obama, the great apostle of hope and change, inherited an enormous, even unprecedented fiscal mess from the Bush administration, he must share some of that mess, owing to the votes for big-government programs as Senator, including his vote (and lobbying of fellow Senators) for the \$700 billion TARP bailout bill in the fall of 2008. Moreover, as President, he has chosen to exacerbate the fiscal mess with costly new programs of his own — starting with a \$792 billion economic stimulus program and a couple of billion in "Cash for Clunkers." Then a massive takeover of the healthcare system, roughly one-sixth of the nation's Gross Domestic Product, a nationalization that is supposed to "pay for itself" with some generous contributions from taxpaying Americans and some judicious trimming of existing Medicare benefits and other programs. And he has expanded the war in Afghanistan to more than wipe out any savings that may come from the winding down of the war in Iraq.

And we will have, depending on the final outcome of House-Senate negotiations, about 100 or so new health agencies, a Health Choices Commissioner, a few score new czars and czarinas, and several thousand high-priced partridges in expensive pear trees. And people wonder why so many Americans sound angry at Tea Party rallies.

But Republicans in Congress are rediscovering the "old-time religion" of fiscal conservatism now because the American people, as Sen. Snowe has observed, are "angry and frustrated." And if there is one thing people "get" in Washington, it is audience reaction. When Clark Griffith was owner of the former Washington Senators, he observed that baseball fans like to see home runs. "We have assembled a pitching staff to please the fans," he said. Uh-huh.

The American people get their elected officials to pay attention to them when we are "angry and frustrated." We have elected a President and a Congress that is keeping us angry and frustrated. Clark Griffith and the Washington Senators eventually left town. Perhaps the time for Barack Obama and the counterfeit conservatives in Congress to leave is nearer than they either wish or dare to believe.

— Photo of Sen. Judd Gregg: AP Images



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