

Friendly Fire

A secretive, one-party government alienates everybody -- even Republicans on the Hill.

by Mary Lynn F. Jones

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(Mar. 23, 2004) Over the last few decades, presidents have used many methods of influence to get lawmakers to pass pieces of legislation. They've personally called members of Congress or invited them for meetings at the White House. They've worked with Hill leaders to gain votes by making concessions on other, less-prized legislation. And they've cajoled members with charm or, in the case of Lyndon Johnson's famous "treatment," intimidation.

President Bush and current congressional leaders, however, have shown a disheartening willingness to take lobbying to a whole new level. Earlier this month, it was disclosed that the chief actuary for Medicare was told last June that he would be fired if he released the cost estimates of the prescription-drug benefit to lawmakers. (The administration is now putting the cost at \$534 billion, not the \$395 billion figure lawmakers were given by the Congressional Budget Office last year). Republicans pressured their own Nick Smith of Michigan to vote for the bill; if he didn't, they threatened, they'd work against his son's congressional campaign to succeed him. House Republicans then held the Medicare vote open for three hours to find the votes necessary to support it.

The GOP has pledged to look into the number fudging and Smith's allegations, but don't hold your breath. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson vowed an investigation into the actuary's statements -- while simultaneously casting the blame on Tom Scully, the former Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services director who has conveniently moved into the private sector. The bipartisan House Standards of Official Conduct Committee is looking into Smith's comments. Except in the most egregious cases, however, the panel usually doles out

slaps on the wrist rather than real punishments.

Meanwhile, Democrats have seized on the issue, saying it goes to the heart of GOP credibility. What's more, polls show many seniors remain confused about what the bill would actually do. Clearly it would have been much better to slow down and pass a good bill than rush a bad one through.

The bigger problem for Republican leaders, though, is that in their zeal to pass the drug bill, they've angered their own members. Conservative Republicans are outraged that they were misled about the cost of the measure. Representative Sue Kelly of New York told the Knight Ridder news service, "I think a lot of people probably would have reconsidered [voting for the bill] because we said that \$400 billion was our top of the line."

Representative Jeff Flake told *The Hill* that the bill "would not pass" Monday because of the higher costs. Senator Chuck Hagel, meanwhile, wants to know what Thompson knew about the actuary's estimates.

Republicans have good reason to be angry. "When you withhold information or, worse, information is released that you know to be false, we've got some real problems," says Democratic Representative Pete Stark, the author of an alternative drug bill. That's especially true when so many Republicans were holding their noses to support the bill. As Democratic Representative Jan Schakowsky notes, "There are a lot of furious members of Congress on the Republican side" who believed the \$395 billion estimate last year. Adds Schakowsky, "One-party government that is secretive and misleading doesn't work."

It's difficult to say whether rank-and-file Republicans will hold their leaders -- both in Congress and in the White House -- accountable. For one thing, it's hard to go against your party's president in an election year. For another, if GOP members decide they need to increase revenues to offset the higher spending, they're likely to do so by cutting spending, not raising taxes, which isn't a great answer, either.

But the Medicare votes shows yet again how arrogant the president and his administration are. Instead of having an honest debate about Medicare, Bush has hoodwinked people who loyally support him most of the time in order to win a victory on a single issue. The question is how

many more bad bills will pass before Hill Republicans wake up.

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