

The Democrats' Dilemma FEATURE STORY | October 29, 2001

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by JOHN NICHOLS

This is difficult, but imagine what it would be like if Democrats in Congress actually had their act together.

In this scenario, it is barely a week after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Airline lobbyists have flooded Capitol Hill with demands for tens of billions in bailout money. The Bush Administration wants to engineer one of the largest corporate welfare payments in US history, and Congressional Republicans are unlocking the Social Security lockbox to find the money. But the legislation contains no money for displaced workers and no protections against the breaking of labor contracts. "President Bush was right when he said this is a time when we must all pull together," says Senate majority leader Tom Daschle, as he announces Democratic opposition to the bailout. "But this bill says that a wealthy few will be made whole while the colleagues of those brave pilots and flight attendants who died at the hands of the terrorists must fend for themselves. We will not support any legislation that leaves the real heroes of September 11 behind." Echoing Daschle, House minority leader Dick Gephardt says, "America's security will not be threatened by fixing this bill; it will, in fact, be enhanced."

How would America have responded to this breaking of the bipartisan lockstep? "I think the American people would have said, 'That's right! Democrats are talking sense. This is a time to take care of everyone, not just the CEOs.' People would have applauded us for standing up. They would have recognized that what we were doing was patriotic and responsible," says Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky. "And you know what? I think the Republicans would have backed down. That would have changed everything; it would have changed things so that issues like protecting jobs, providing healthcare, getting money into job retraining and education programs would have been much more central to these debates we are having. That's an opportunity that we lost, and I'm very frustrated by it."

Schakowsky is not alone. Democrats across the political spectrum have been complaining on Capitol Hill about how Gephardt and Daschle have seemed to be determined to confirm the observation of Senate minority leader Trent Lott on the evening of Bush's "win this war" speech to Congress: "Tonight there is no opposition party." This is not to say that Capitol Hill Democrats are of one mind about the form an opposition should take. But it is to say that even the most cautious Democrats are wondering whether their party is sacrificing its future on the altar of wartime "bipartisanship."

During and after the hastily organized September 21 bailout vote, there was open grumbling about the fact that Daschle's wife is a lobbyist for the airline industry; and almost a month after the attack, Democratic senators note that the featured image on Daschle's website is a photograph of Washington's most powerful Democrat hugging George W. Bush.

On the House side, a senior member complains, "There is a lot of feeling right now that Dick Gephardt is more interested in looking presidential than in leading an effective opposition. I'm hearing people say maybe it's time for him to make the choice, because these last few weeks

have proven that you can't do both." House Democratic caucuses have been more frequent and more bitter than at any time in recent memory. A meeting of Democrats on the House Ways and Means Committee degenerated into a screaming match over where to draw the line on compromises with Republicans over Bush's demand for fast-track negotiating authority to shape free-trade agreements. Deficit hawks want to know why, after preaching the gospel of fiscal restraint for a decade, Democratic leaders are helping Republicans crack open the Social Security lockbox. Recession-wary progressives wonder whether the term "public works" will ever re-enter the party's parlance.

To be sure, a party that elected San Francisco progressive Nancy Pelosi as whip on October 10 and that includes both Congresswoman Barbara Lee, who cast the sole vote against authorizing a "use of force" blank check in response to the terrorist attacks, and hawks such as Senator Zell Miller is hardly monolithic. But there is remarkable unity on the theme that the party lacked a sense of direction in the defining weeks after the September 11 attacks.

At every turn, on issues ranging from warmaking to free trade to civil liberties to economic policy-making in a time of recession, the complaint was the same: Party leaders and key committee chairs seemed to allow Republicans to shape the agenda to such an extent that it was often "bipartisan" in name only. Even where there have been genuine compromises--as when the House Judiciary Committee eliminated the worst excesses of Attorney General John Ashcroft's domestic investigation and detention proposals--there is an awareness that the impetus has come less from Democratic leaders than from well-placed senior members like Congressman John Conyers. And for every "bipartisan" compromise that actually reflected Democratic contributions, there was a story like the one of Daschle intervening to undermine moves by Senate Judiciary Committee members to temper Ashcroft's proposals.

"There are people on our side who are really unhappy with the leadership," says Representative Sherrod Brown, a Democrat who has worked closely with Gephardt. "There is discomfort with the way in which the Republican leadership has rushed in to help corporations instead of workers, but there is also unease with Democrats who have acquiesced to the Republicans." Schakowsky put that unease into words: "Why are Democrats the ones who are saying, 'Maybe this isn't our time?' Why are Democrats the ones saying, 'We have to be restrained?'" She adds, "Even Bush is acknowledging the need to extend unemployment benefits. I don't understand our reluctance to stand up for working Americans."

For some Democrats in Washington, the answer is clear enough: Daschle and Gephardt seem to have frozen in the face of their greatest challenge. Only after three weeks, at a point when Bush was busy embracing traditional Democratic commitments to expand unemployment benefits and provide healthcare coverage, did Gephardt start talking seriously about a Democratic agenda.

"This has been a defining moment for Gephardt, and he has blown it," argued a top aide to a senior Democrat on the Appropriations Committee. "Maybe he was in shock, maybe he really felt he was doing the right thing, but he has blown it. He has let the Republicans control the agenda to such an extent that I'm not sure whether we will be able to get back into it. I'm angry because I'm a Democrat. But I'm also angry for the country; the Republican approach really isn't going to work, and when Democrats let them implement it, we fail the people who are relying on us to get this thing right."

A veteran House Democrat adds, "For a long time, we've been saying the Republicans just don't get it. Since September 11, I've come to recognize that our leaders are the ones who don't get it."

Daschle's and Gephardt's allies dismiss the criticism, suggesting that their actions have reflected the desire of Americans for cooperation rather than confrontation. Gephardt says he has had an open door to the office of House Speaker Dennis Hastert, and that Hastert has signaled an honest determination to work with Democrats. "The Speaker's given me his word, and I trust him," the minority leader told members during a caucus debate. Gephardt claims that grumbling from within the caucus has to do with the fact that "bipartisanship is abnormal." But, he adds, these are abnormal times in Washington.

In the aftermath of the attacks, Capitol Hill was in shock. Like most Americans, members of Congress were horrified by the loss of life in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, and they were frightened by the prospect that terrorism had come not merely to America but to the edge of the city where they govern. Security fears forced the evacuation of the Capitol the day before Congress voted 98-0 in the Senate and 420-1 in the House to grant Bush broad powers to wage a war on terrorism.

While Senate Democrats negotiated some constraints on the President's warmaking authority, Democratic Senator Robert Byrd now admits that in giving hasty approval to the use-of-force resolution, Congress failed in its constitutional duties. "[As] I delved more deeply into the resolution, I began to have some qualms over how broad a grant of authority Congress gave [Bush] in its rush to act quickly," says the senior Democrat. "Because of the speed with which it was passed, there was little discussion establishing a foundation for the resolution. Because of the paucity of debate, it would be difficult to glean from the record the specific intent of Congress."

Byrd is not calling for revisiting the resolution, at least not yet. But he is saying that Democrats must remove the "zipper on our lips" and stop yielding to the Bush Administration and Congressional conservatives on issues such as funding National Missile Defense. Byrd's words are echoed by historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who argues, "Congress should have debated missile defense instead of yielding to the executive. The campaign against terrorism may well produce collateral damage to the economy and encroachment on the Bill of Rights. Congress also needs to debate those questions more intensely." Schlesinger provided some encouragement to Democrats by reminding them that the party standing in opposition to a wartime President--even one with approval ratings as high as those Bush now enjoys--invariably gains seats in midterm Congressional elections.

But that supposes Democrats will actually mount some kind of opposition.

So far, Republicans have often been the most high-profile challengers of the White House. Senator John McCain was out front in saying Bush was wrong to oppose federalizing airport security. Senator Arlen Specter has been notably outspoken in his questioning of the constitutionality of wiretap provisions in the antiterrorism bill. On the opposite side of the ideological spectrum, House right-wingers have been raising a ruckus about Bush's newfound sympathy for displaced workers. Their loud calls for a stimulus package powered by tax cuts rather than Keynesian social investment appear to be pulling Bush back to the right.

Assuming there might be space to the left of McCain and Specter, however, where might a wise opposition open the debate? Beyond immediate questions that must be raised, especially in the Senate, about whether the War Powers Act is being violated and whether civil liberties are being protected, the opening is obvious: It's still the economy, stupid. Says David Obey, ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, "Our patriotic duty is to make sure that the economy is strong, and that working people--not just CEOs--know that their government is on their side."

While other high-ranking Democrats seemed dazed in the weeks after September 11, and even after Gephardt delivered two impassioned pleas for Democrats to back the \$15 billion airline bailout bill, Obey and Congressman Lloyd Doggett led a September 21 revolt by close to fifty progressive Democrats against a plan to protect CEOs and investors while neglecting flight attendants and janitors. That marked the first significant break with bipartisanship. Progressives argue that the revolt serves as a model for the populist fight that Congressional Democrats ought to be making.

"I haven't talked to anyone outside Washington who doesn't have a problem with an airline bailout in which the CEOs do very well and the workers don't," says Sherrod Brown. "But I don't think Congress has caught on yet. There are a lot of Democrats who are still afraid to question the President on much of anything. What we need to recognize is that just because the voters support President Bush in pursuing bin Laden doesn't mean that they support the Republican economic agenda. In fact, the community feeling--the coming together that I'm seeing in the country--means, I think, that a lot more people are open to an argument that in tough economic times we've got to take care of everyone, not just the CEOs."

As Republican Congressional leaders push for additional capital gains and corporate tax cuts while resisting significant aid for displaced workers, Obey says, "The whole point of our Democratic message should be that everyone's in this together. It's the message that Americans embraced during World War II, and it is still, I believe, the message that patriotic Americans respond to. You don't create national unity by creating investment opportunities for the investment class while leaving behind the working class. It's like being on the Titanic. If the Titanic takes on water, it would be nice to provide everyone with a lifeboat."

But how do we pay for the lifeboats? Obey was among the first to take aim at the tax cuts for the wealthy pushed through Congress in the spring by the Bush Administration. He would freeze a planned cut in the top marginal tax rate, which is paid by the wealthiest seven-tenths of 1 percent of Americans--a move, Obey says, that will free tens of billions of dollars to meet commitments already made, allow for modest tax rebates for working Americans as an economic stimulus and insure the long-term stability of the economy.

But do Democrats have the guts to build their program around an agenda that conservative Republicans will almost certainly describe as a tax "increase"? "They should," says Representative Bernie Sanders, the Independent who caucuses with the Democrats and plays a leadership role, with Dennis Kucinich, in the Congressional Progressive Caucus. "If the President wants to go before the American people and say that in order to pay for needed programs, it's better public policy to go into that Social Security trust fund than to reduce the tax break for the richest 1 percent of Americans, he's welcome to do that. I would be very pleased to debate him anywhere, anytime, before any audience."

The Progressive Caucus has introduced an ambitious House proposal for expanded unemployment benefits, healthcare and social-service spending, public works spending and tax rebates for the working poor, financed with \$200 billion raised over the next decade by postponing tax cuts for the top 1 percent of taxpayers. Senator Paul Wellstone is pushing similar ideas with his "Workforce Recovery" bill.

Schakowsky has even bigger plans for what could be done with \$340 billion raised through a more ambitious scaling back of tax cuts, detailed in the "First Things First" act she introduced on October 2. A neighborhood organizer in Chicago before she came to Congress, Schakowsky has already pulled together support for her bill from US Action, AFSCME, the Association of Flight Attendants and other groups. Representative Jesse Jackson Jr., a co-sponsor of both the

Progressive Caucus and First Things First measures, says that at a time when faith in the ability of government to accomplish big things is at its highest level in thirty-five years, Democrats must say "now is the right time to make a public investment to meet America's unmet needs--build high-speed rail, fix our crumbling schools, improve our healthcare system, provide a high-quality daycare system and rebuild all our communities, urban and rural--not just limit our appropriate responses to New York City."

In early October, as he moved into what he called "the second phase of bipartisanship," Gephardt was talking tough about opposing GOP attempts to wrap a fast-track bill in the flag of patriotism and force the free-trade initiative through Congress. And the minority leader had finally begun to discuss scaling back some of the Bush tax cut and directing resources toward economic stimulus schemes more ambitious than those announced with such fanfare by the President. But Gephardt was still shying away from the bold initiatives that progressives are proposing, and his reticence continued to beg the question of whether the "loyal opposition" remains more loyal to maintaining the facade of bipartisanship than to the task of mounting a genuine opposition.

Democrats who seek to move their party toward an embrace of progressive populist economic policies are not giving up. But they're not naïve, either. They recognize that before they can move Congress, they must first move their own party leadership from Hoover-like caution to Roosevelt-like "nothing to fear but fear itself" crusading and campaigning.

"The first question really is whether Democrats will have the stamina to do the right thing. I know there is a fear on the part of a lot of Democrats in Washington that it might somehow be politically dangerous to bring up contentious issues at this point," says Schakowsky. "Those of us who have been out listening to our constituents know that it isn't dangerous. And we have to get into our caucuses and say to the leadership and our fellow members, 'Look, the question of who is going to get a tax cut is not a national security issue.' What it is is a test for the Democratic Party. Our core constituencies, the people who rely on us to represent them, are hurting. We need to stand up for those people. The Republicans aren't afraid to stand up for their core constituencies--they're still pushing tax cuts for the wealthy, bailouts for corporations. I think if we started to distinguish ourselves on these issues, we'd find that the American people would be with us--not just in this year's legislative battles but in the 2002 elections."