

Bills and Those That Pass Them:

Well folks, we have a Bailout Bill. Congress and the President have come to the aid of the financial institutions, in a big way. Their second try did the trick. There were enough additions and inclusions in the second bill that many 'Nay' votes were turned into 'Ayes' and the bill was passed comfortably. I confess that in the darker corners of my mind I imagine that many of those who voted 'no' on the first bill did so with every confidence that they would vote 'yes' on the follow up. You see, that way during this campaign season, they can honestly tell their constituents that they voted 'no' to the rescue of the fat cats. You'd be surprised at how many citizens will just leave it at that and never ask the follow up question.

Did you know that Nancy Pelosi's speech before Congress is what killed the first Bailout Bill? Yup, even Karl Rove says so. It must be true if Karl says so because Karl knows stuff. Apparently the speech was so partisan that all those Representatives who changed their votes to 'Nay' (there were 13 of them) had no choice but to kill the bill. That must have been some speech, right? I mean, what they're saying is that getting yelled at by a middle aged lady was worse than the danger of a collapsed banking system. We're talking about grown men and women who deliver partisan speeches for a living, being so upset by another partisan speech that it seemed worth it to them to ditch the Bill. Why do we put up with this?

I had to chuckle when Rove, now a media pundit, said the speech was so partisan, so vicious that he was hurt by it. This is Karl Rove talking. This is a man who would stab an opponent between the eyes, step over the body and then accuse the dead guy of being negative.

I agree that Pelosi's speech was a gratuitous series of superfluous pokes at the Bush administration. It was a hatchet job by an old hand at political hatchetry. Nancy Pelosi didn't invent partisan politics but she's building on her own solid base. George Bush didn't invent partisan politics but he brought it to new heights (thanks again, Karl). Bill Clinton didn't invent partisan politics but he was a brilliant practitioner of it. No, there's nothing new in what Pelosi's speech was trying to do; blame the other guy for everything and do it loudly. Then step over the body.

I think this unswerving partisanship is one reason that the public's opinion of Congress is even dimmer than their view of the President; and that's pretty dim. The President has a 30% approval rating, give or take. Congress is running about 20% and sometimes even lower. Ouch! So, let me ask you something. If four out of five Americans think Congress isn't doing a good job, why do we return 85% of Congress to their seats? Am I missing something? How is it that you're almost guaranteed re election even if the electorate says you're doing a lousy job? It's as if we, the American public are those three monkeys, seeing no evil, hearing no evil and speaking no evil, at least about our own candidate.

Maybe we think all those other Representatives are scoundrels but not our guy. It's more or less obvious that this can't be the case. Everyone's Rep. can't be the lone, pure soul or else all the skullduggery that gets pulled off couldn't happen. You need a lot of accomplices to get stuff passed. Or maybe one district's noble endeavor is another district's pork. If that bridge project brings money into the district, it seems like a good thing. Meanwhile everyone else in the country is asking, "But where does the bridge go?" I guess the late Tip O'Neill was right when he said, "All politics is local."

I must be getting old. I find myself missing Tip and Sam Rayburn and Dirksen and Paul Simon and Gerald Ford and Pat Moynihan and Hubert. These were people with whom I regularly disagreed but rarely doubted their competence or sincerity. I feel like we are in an age of lightweights for whom Government Service is a stepping stone to a lobbyist's job and intellectual curiosity is as important as pocket change on Wall Street.

So be it. Pining for the age of rhetoric and heroes is as useful as wishing for public financing of political campaigns. The prior age will not return and private money will always run the show. We can handle it. We just have to pay closer attention. We need to always ask the follow up question and never be satisfied that your Rep is who she says she is. It is crucial to our political decisions. It is vital to our judgment of the Bills and those that pass them.