

IOWA TRANSPARENCY NEWSLETTER



"President of all the people, beyond the rhetoric"

by Doug Stout

What is the real story behind the façade of the new bipartisan rhetoric? A more transparent look shows the Congressional leadership and many Administration officials are not following the new script. Senator Evan Bayh announced on February 15 that he was retiring from the Senate at the end of his term this year. Mr. Bayh is the son of Senator Birch Bayh, a three-term United States Senator who was an unapologetic "Great Society liberal."¹ Evan Bayh ran for Indiana Governor in 1988 and for the United States Senate in 1998, promoting fiscal responsibility. For some he was an example of what we used to label as a "centrist" Democratic Senator of national prominence. He issued a statement that basically said that he had grown sour on the partisanship in Washington, D.C. He was quoted as saying "To put it in the words most Hoosiers can understand: I love working for the people of Indiana, I love helping our citizens make the most of their lives, but I do not love Congress."² A *Roll Call* article the day of the announcement made these observations:

"Democratic sources say Bayh, a former two-term governor, never took to the Senate. The moderate was increasingly fed up with what he viewed as an overly partisan institution and was stung by criticism from the left-wing Internet blogs that he

was not a real Democrat... One Democratic source said Reid's decision last week to shelve a bipartisan jobs package negotiated between Senate Finance Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) and ranking member Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) played a role in Bayh's decision."³

On February 14, the *Washington Post* ran an editorial entitled "Out of Work."⁴ It said: "Sens. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) and Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa) produced an \$85 billion draft bill whose centerpiece was a proposal to cut payroll taxes for businesses that hire unemployed workers. The White House praised it, saying it included 'several of the president's top priorities for job creation.'"⁵ What happened to the bipartisan effort endorsed by the White House? The legislation was rejected by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada), who controls what reaches the Senate floor.

Senator Grassley's statement described it this way: "On Thursday afternoon, the Senate Majority Leader, Senator Reid, pulled out the rug from that effort, announcing that he would bring to the floor a partisan jobs bill for senators to take or leave, without any opportunity to improve it through amendment... The announcement was a surprise because Senator Reid had signed off on the Baucus-Grassley proposal the previous

day."⁶ Although Senator Reid did not say so, the conventional wisdom is that he faced vocal disapproval of the bipartisan proposal from liberal Senators in his own party. Senators Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), and Senator Grassley were openly unhappy that the spirit of bipartisanship seemed to have a very short expiration date. One can imagine that Senator Baucus (D-Mont.) and Senator Schumer (D-NY), who were the primary Democrats working on the legislation, also were not pleased.

How many more times will pragmatic Republicans and Democrats negotiate in good faith only to see the partisan Democratic leadership show their true colors? Apparently, compromise means that Republicans must sign-on to legislation written behind closed doors by Democrats, on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. There is an old saying "Fool me once, shame on you... Fool me twice, shame on me."

In 2008 in California, the voters tried to take the job of redistricting the political districts away from the politicians and put it in the hands of a citizen redistricting commission. *Roll Call* newspaper reports on a *Los Angeles Times* story that United States Speaker of the House, Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi (D-California) and a dozen other California Members have collectively contributed \$140,000 to an initiative designed to get rid of the citizen commission.⁷

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The *Roll Call* author says: "Through the years, Pelosi and Congressional Democrats from the Golden State have vehemently opposed attempts to take the remapping of House districts away from their fellow politicians."⁸ The Speaker's extreme partisanship is seldom in question and is readily apparent in this cynical effort.

Another low moment in the last month came when Robert Gibbs spoke in his official role as Presidential spokesman during a White House press briefing, where minutes before, the President of the United States had addressed the press. The *Associated Press* headline says it all: "White House mocks Sarah Palin from podium." While standing at that podium in the West Wing of the White House, which belongs to all Americans, Spokesman Gibbs took the opportunity to take a cheap political shot at Sarah Palin. He mocked her use of reminders of points she wanted to make in a Nashville speech that she had written on her palm. The same *Associated Press* story observed: "Many in the room, where President Barack Obama had spoken just minutes before about the need for bipartisanship, groaned at the political shot."⁹

Of course everyone knows that former Governor Palin is "fair game." Why again is that exactly? On the same day was another story, "Court halts rules on Edwards sex tape retrieval"¹⁰ Wasn't John Edwards the Democratic Vice-Presidential nominee with Al Gore? He is the one who really should be a national punch line. The most anyone can fairly say about former Governor Palin is to question whether or not she was qualified to be Vice-President of the United States when Senator McCain chose her as his running mate. Why is it ok to attack her on almost a daily basis? I might add that some of the stories inevitably focus on her attire. Would that be "ok" if they constantly commented on the suit choices of Vice-President Biden? His comments are not very widely reported, but he is a man who

has arguably said more "odd" things since becoming Vice-President than Dan Quayle ever did...and on much more serious topics. I think it is less damaging to have a poor speller in the position, than someone who makes off-the-wall foreign policy comments that sometimes must have allies, as well as adversaries, shaking their heads.

The double standard used by the national media when dealing with people who they can't relate to...and who they don't personally like...is not new and I think is fairly well understood by now. But, it is not just the media. If you want to have some insight into what really happened in the Massachusetts Senate race, you might look at the attitude of the candidates. The Democratic loser in the race, Attorney General Martha Coakley, actually mocked Scott Brown for standing outside Fenway Park in Boston early in the morning shaking hands with workers going by...and President Obama got into the act by saying: "He's driving his truck around the commonwealth and he says that he gets you." "Forget the truck. Anybody can buy a truck." when throwing barbs at the Scott Brown campaign.¹¹

Apparently, it was a popular theme. Massachusetts Senator and former Democratic Presidential candidate, Senator John Kerry, continued on the trend: "I've got news for you, Scott: George Bush drove a truck, too, and look where it got us. I didn't know it was a qualification for being in the Senate."¹²

Well in a nationwide recession, of course many of us are painfully aware that not "anyone" can actually currently afford to buy a pick-up truck. But more importantly the cultural implication is that neither Martha Coakley, nor President Obama for that matter, would have any interest in owning one. Of course, it isn't really about the truck. The question is whether you can relate to...and respect the perspective...of that middle class rural family out there just trying

to make a living. I have never been to Massachusetts, but if there are not now enough Ivy League college-educated liberals in the state to elect a like-minded Senator in the state that gave the country United States Senator John Kerry, then I think I understand why a lot of Democrats are leaving Congress on their own terms before the November elections rather than face a lot of perturbed American voters.

This Administration seems to be having a tough time distinguishing between blaming Republicans for not supporting liberal, out-of-the-mainstream ideas, which most of them have been opposed to their entire careers, and the concept of being bipartisan. This does not mean that the opposing party is supposed to go along with concepts they legitimately believe would be bad for this nation. It is supposed to involve sitting down before decisions are made and negotiating an approach to a problem that involves compromise and shared objectives. Yes, Americans elected Mr. Obama President, and yes, in my mind at least, that means lawmakers should “give him the benefit of the doubt” and try to work with him to solve the nation’s problems. It does not mean they should “rubber stamp” ideas and approaches to government that go against the key concepts that caused them to run for public office in the first place. This is always true, but when it comes to healthcare proposals that are also opposed by a majority of their constituents, voting for the legislation would not be bipartisan. It would be the highest form of betrayal of their integrity and of their obligation to work in the best interest of the people who elected them. Bipartisanship does not mean “rolling over,” for the other party’s objectives; it means negotiating toward a consensus, which if not ideal, is at least palatable to the “loyal opposition.”

On the other side of the coin, bipartisanship does mean that if you are in

the minority, you try to work with the majority to strike acceptable solutions to solve the nation’s pressing problems. If the opportunity arises, Republican members should not be attacked for a lack of “purity” if they are able to reach agreements with the President without compromising their principles. He is our President and we should have little sympathy for those who choose to think of him as “the enemy,” even in a purely partisan political sense. At any one time our country only has one President. President Obama is currently our President and he deserves the respect that office holds and we should all remember that point.

On the other hand, you need to play your part, Mr. President. Presidents may be the head of their political party, but they are REQUIRED to be much, much more. They are the leader of a great nation...all of the people of a great nation. They used to be called the “Leader of the Free World.” The second term may change with the nature of the world and may be somewhat at the discretion of the President...the obligation to rise above “party” and be the American President is not an option; it is a necessary job requirement. I think this President has had a difficult time making that transition. It means not using the trappings of the Office of the President of the United States to issue partisan attacks; it means rising above the fight. It means, no matter how many times the current Administration attacks former President George Bush, he personally does not respond; it is not Presidential. It means that while there is nothing wrong with having the Democratic National Committee Chairman or any other political operative of the President exchanging barbs with Sarah Palin, it is not the job of the President or of the President’s Press Secretary to be doing it from the West Wing of the White House. On the other hand, if the President wants to hold a campaign event and use that opportunity

to attack the GOP, then while I think it may be unwise and detrimental to his objectives to do so, I don’t think it is inappropriate.

When you blur the role between “President of the United States, our Commander-in-Chief,” and being the top Democrat in the country, I think you are undermining your own authority and I think that President Obama has done that to himself. Letting his Spokesman take political shots unrelated to federal policy while speaking on behalf of the Presidency in the West Wing does not enhance his role as President of every American.

The President might want to take the advice of Democratic former Governor of Virginia, Douglas Wilder, who endorsed Obama during the 2008 campaign. He spoke out after Democratic losses in Virginia, New Jersey, and the most recent disaster for the party in Massachusetts. He said the President should make considerable changes in the staff he has working for him in the White House. Wilder said: “Getting elected and getting things done for the people are two different jobs.” He suggested that the President and his operatives had not made the necessary transition from campaigning to governing.¹³

Wilder, who was the nation’s first African-American Governor, also gives the following advice to the President:

“Unless changes are made at the top, by the top, when the time comes for voters to show how they really feel about Obama, his policies and the messages he sends directly or through the people around him, the President will discover that Virginia, New Jersey and Massachusetts were not just temporary aberrations but, rather, timely expressions of voters who always show that they are ahead of the politicians.¹⁴”

If President Obama wants bipartisanship, then he has to rise above

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the extreme culture of partisanship that is now present in our country. I assumed that is what he expected to do when he talked optimistically about changing the “culture of Washington.” However, he has not done so; he has embraced the culture and become an active participant in the partisan exchanges.

I hope Mr. Obama is still able to rise above the fray and actually become more Presidential. I know that if he would have done so from the beginning, many Americans would have welcomed the approach, if not many of his policy initiatives. I hope there is still time and he will replace his campaign operatives with pragmatic problem solvers. The American people have problems that must be solved; the President can’t afford to view half of them as opponents who must be vanquished. I suspect if he takes that negative approach, his party will see the ill results in November...as Governor Wilder said, voters always show they are

ahead of the politicians. I personally do not want to see four years of a failed Presidency. We can’t afford to lose the time to address our very real problems in a manner that is productive for all Americans. We need a President and a White House staff, actually an entire Administration, who recognize they are no longer representing a political party, or an ideology, but instead they are working for a great nation in times of peril and that all of our citizens need to be respected and brought into the fold, the sooner the better. The transparent reality must be brought in line with the rhetorical initiative.

(Endnotes)

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¹⁴Ibid.