



**THE BLOG** 02/09/2009 05:12 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

## Patriotic Extortion



By Marty Kaplan

Like religious zealots whose tiny parties hold Israeli governing coalitions hostage, three Republican senators have the Democratic Congress by the short hairs. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, along with Maine's two Senators, Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, have improbably been empowered to kosher the stimulus bill - to decide which billions get called pork, and which get the "centrist" seal of approval. And in the political equivalent of the Stockholm syndrome, grass roots Democrats are now being urged by liberal groups to call these senators' offices and tell them what profiles in courage they are.

I don't doubt that it took gumption for Sens. Specter, Snowe and Collins to tell Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) that they were going rogue on him. After all, not a single House Republican had the moxie to tell their leader, Rep. John Boehner (R-OH), that the worst economic meltdown since the Great Depression might be an opportune moment to find common ground with a party fresh from winning the House, the Senate and the White House with the promise to change how Washington works.

But risking McConnell's ire was a small price to pay in return for wielding scimitars on the Obama proposal. Anything this troika wanted cut from the bill was axed. Higher education construction projects? Eliminated - along with the jobs that \$3.5 billion would have created. School construction? \$16 billion gone. Funds to green federal buildings? \$3.5 billion bites the dust, just because they said so.

Perhaps the most galling excision was a \$40 billion cut in aid to states.

Faced with plunging personal, sales and corporate income tax revenue, the states are looking at a \$350 billion shortfall between now and fiscal year 2011. Unlike the federal government, states by law can't run a deficit. To deal with this year's \$47 billion hole, desperate states are moving toward massive layoffs of public employees, painful cuts in services and higher taxes and fees. Every one of the 40 billion "fiscal stabilization" dollars that these three senators cut from the stimulus bill would have helped the states avoid the fate they're facing: laying off cops and firefighters and school nurses, cutting health care; closing parks, scaling back environmental programs, shutting down public

transportation systems, stiffing the states' vendors, and dragging down their economies by enacting higher taxes. And for this these senators deserve our thanks?

Yet Barack Obama gets no bipartisan street cred with the Washington establishment for peeling them from the minority. "I guarantee this is not bipartisan," pronounced the Republican presidential candidate he defeated, for whom he has since done everything short of installing him in a White House granny flat.

No, the only reason the president is praising these three senators' "patriotism," the only reason blue dog Sen. Ben Nelson (D-NE) cooked up this deal with them, the only reason that majority leader Harry Reid (D-NV) and White House chief of staff Rahm Emmanuel blessed this "compromise," is that Democrats fall three votes short of the 60 they'd need shut off a Republican filibuster.

Here's how the Senate works these days: Fifty-one votes may be enough of a majority to chair the committees and get the good offices, but it's not enough to get a bill passed. In the last Congress, and apparently in this one, if the Democratic majority lacks 60 votes for anything, they pre-emptively cave. They won't bring a measure to the floor unless they already know that they can stop the Republicans from talking it to death.

Imagine if the Democrats had not pre-capitulated to the Republicans on the stimulus bill. Imagine if they had forced the Republicans to actually mount a filibuster - to talk all night, to give the television cameras a good long look at obstructionism in action. If the American people had seen what Republicans truly mean by "loyal opposition," who knows? Maybe the ensuing firestorm would have convinced a few Republicans facing re-election in 2010 to fold even without bribing them with bad policy decisions.

A President Obama who stuck to his guns, who rallied the country, who forced the Republicans to reveal themselves as curators of a failed ideology; a president who compromised no more than he had to might not get props from the media elite, and he'd have to put away a childish thing like unilateral bipartisanship. But as John McCain's whingeing proves, chasing solons who put party ahead of country is a mug's game.

The \$40 billion removed from the fiscal stabilization funds at the behest of Sens. Specter, Snowe and Collins may yet be put back in the bill by the House-Senate conference committee. If that happens, here's hoping that the political cost of restoring them isn't any greater than the price in principle that the Administration has already paid.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*

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