PS1 for 2/16/89 # The Defeat of the Federal Pay Raise

The House defeat of the federal pay raise by 380 to 48 was a dramatic demonstration of the vitality and effectiveness of the conservative grassroots movement. It showed that, despite overwhelming odds, the people were able to rise up and say NO to the 50 percent pay raise for Congress, top executive officials, and federal judges.

A few weeks ago, it seemed as though “everyone” was for the pay raise, at least “everyone” who mattered. Ronald Reagan, before he departed to live in his new multi-million dollar house equipped with his presidential golden parachute, had specifically signed his approval.

President George Bush said he favored it. Congressional leaders joined in a rare manifestation of bipartisan unity. Speak Jim Wright, the oracle of the liberal Democrats, and House Republican leader Bob Michel spoke with a single voice in support of the pay raise. Republicans also acquiesced in an under-the-table deal, promising that they would not use the pay raise as a partisan campaign issue.

How amazing! Bipartisan unity that couldn’t be forged for such pressing national objectives as reducing the deficit or protecting Americans’ lives against incoming missiles or supporting Freedom Fighters in Central America, appeared to be cemented in concrete for the objective of raising each others’ salaries.

A month ago, it was as obvious as the proverbial nose on your face that the pay raise could be a winning issue for Republicans in 1990, if only they would get their act together and use it. Why didn’t they recognize it?

Take, for example, Republican National Chairman Lee Atwater, whose job is to elect Republicans. Everything he can do and all the money he can spend in the next 20 months before the 1990 elections **combined** don’t add up to the political advantage Republicans could have gained if they had opposed the pay raise as a partisan issue.

But where was Lee Atwater on this? He lined up with Presidential, Congressional and judicial leadership in supporting the pay raise, thereby throwing away an issue that might have elected a Republican Congressional majority in the 1990 elections.

In private gatherings, Republicans admit that the biggest problem they face is how to break the “incumbency” factor of Congress; that is, the fact that 99 percent of Congressmen are reelected. That is due largely to the perks of incumbency and the fact that Political Action Committees donate most of their funds to incumbents and not to challengers.

So, the Republican leadership endorsed a whopping pay raise that will reward incumbency instead of discourage it. It doesn’t make sense.

The pay raise was engineered by the federal Quadrennial Commission on Salaries headed by Washington lawyer and Jimmy Carter adviser, Lloyd Cutler. His mindset is that the United States

should be ruled by a little coterie of elitists, and for years he's been trying to change the U.S. Constitution to bring that about.

The media elite cooperated in this raid on the taxpayers' Treasury by downplaying the slick automatic-raise maneuver in the first half of the 30-day time period. There was a good chance that the pay raise would become a fait accompli before the public realized how their pockets had been picked.

On the day Cutler commission announced its 50 percent pay raise recommendation, for example, Dan Rather's CBS Evening TV News, didn't even mention it.

Out across this land, however, the news of the pay raise was beamed loud and clear on local talk radio. Once the voters heard the facts, they leapt into action with phone calls, letters, and tea bags.

The battle against the pay raise was led in the Senate, not by Republican leader Bob Dole, but by conservative Republican Senators Gordon Humphrey and Chuck Grassley. In the House, the arguments against the pay raise were articulated by Iowa Congressman Tom Tauke, a conservative who is not in leadership.

The principal advocates of the pay raise were liberal Senators Ted Kennedy and Chris Dodd. They supported the pay raise because they knew they could turn it into a propaganda vehicle to raise domestic spending for every giveaway program they have up their sleeves.

In the press, the principal voices against the pay raise were conservative columnists Patrick Buchanan, wielding his usual colorful prose, and Warren Brookes, who produced his typical mind-boggling statistics to show the public that Congress has already feathered its own nest with pay, pensions, and perks.

We've been told for the last two years that the principal issues are the deficit and ethics. All those who supported the pay raise have abandoned their moral right to talk about either.