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THE POLITICS OF PRINCIPLES AND POCKETBOOKS

The U.S. Senate session on the evening of May 21 was the thread from which legends are woven. Pending was the federal budget which had been endorsed by the Senate leadership and the Administration.

During the preceding week, the sponsors of this Administration budget had retailored it in order to secure the votes of the left fringe of the Republican Party. After those GOP liberals added their liberal spending demands, the version that emerged would raise federal taxes by $365 billion over three years, and would raise spending by $282.2 billion.

The question was, would Senate conservatives fall in step behind a liberal budget in order to avoid the wrath of their leadership? The clerk read the roll-call of Senators until he came to the name of the distinguished senior Senator from North Carolina.

CLERK: Mr. Helms. MR. HELMS: No. CLERK: Mr. Helms, no.

Jesse Helms speaks with a self-effacing playfulness that can border, at times, on impishness. But that night, his words reverberated like thunder.

The lead sentence in the next day's WASHINGTON POST read: "The Senate, over protests from liberals and grumbles from conservatives, last night approved a $784 billion budget."

In fact, Helms was the only conservative who voted against the resolution. But such is his moral authority that his vote was understood to be the authentic voice of conservatives. He is living proof that a conservative can become a powerhouse without compromising his principles.

On issues ranging from abortion to wage requirements for federal construction projects under the Davis-Bacon Act, most conservative and pro-business voices have been silenced in the present Congress in the name of "party unity."

Jesse Helms has been a consistent, sometimes lonely, voice in favor of dealing with issues such as prayer, abortion, and busing. Yet, any objective observer must admit that

those issues played a significant role in sweeping a Republican President and Senate into their landslide victory in 1980.

If the goal of the Administration and the Senate Majority Leader continues to be to make their proposals immediately acceptable to the majority of Congress, then they will have effectively delegated to the Lowell Weickers and the Mac Mathiases the power to write the Administration's agenda. That is not why the American people elected Ronald Reagan.

Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker has been publicly conciliatory toward conservatives, but behind the scenes he has been an implacable foe of dealing with the so-called "social" issues. He has privately railed at the prospect of "stirring up" anti-abortion groups by raising social issues on the floor of the Senate.

The trouble with Baker's strategy is that it puts all the Republican campaign "eggs" in one issue basket. It leaves Republican Senate and Congressional candidates on exposed terrain where the winds of the economy can determine whether they win or lose.

In the election of 1980, President Jimmy Carter and Democratic incumbents found out what it's like to be running in a year when the economic tide runs against you. They learned what happens when their opponent asks the voters, Are you better off now than you were four years ago?

Baker's issue strategy leaves Republican Senate and Congressional candidates with no issues to run on except the economy. That's a great idea if the U.S. economy is prospering in November, but it's a terrible idea if we are in a depression.

If it turns out that a $104 billion-a-year deficit in 1982, a $1.533 trillion federal debt by 1985, and a 1985 federal tax bite that is $193 billion above the 1982 level, does NOT lead us into prosperity just around the corner, the voters will vent their anger and dismay at Republicans.

Sound political strategy would allow Republican candidates one or more alternate issues to run on if the economy is depressed. Republican candidates need some way to appeal to voters even though they may be out of a job, or worried about losing a job, or having a hard time making ends meet because of taxes.

Voters are wont to vote their pocketbooks in national elections. But, this year, it would be a good idea for Republicans to offer voters the opportunity to vote on some issues other than unemployment and high interest rates.