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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

THE MESS IN WASHINGTON GETS WORSE!

Last week in this column, I raised the question of just who are the Conservatives and who are the Liberals in the nation's capital? Washington aggrandizement has infiltrated our lives. But not so, say several members of the Louisiana Congressional Delegation. A call from a Senator's office along with several Congressmen make the case that, well yes, perhaps there's been some intrusion on social issues. But they make the case that conservative stalwarts in both parties have stemmed the tide of deficit spending and entitlement expansion in the effort to shove sticks into the spinning spokes of government, and still wave the flag of states' rights in the process. Hummmmm. Are they correct? Well, let's take a look.

First of all, there are those who make the case that, now that the Republicans have control of both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, federal spending has finally come under control. Right? That's hardly the case. In fact, there has developed a bi-partisan consensus that government spending is and should be growing. We sure have come a long way, many would say the wrong way, from the Gingrich Revolution of the mid-1990s.

What happened to all of the government programs we were told would be drastically reduced or even eliminated? If you look at the overall growth in spending as a percentage of GDP (Gross Domestic Product), there has been a substantial **increase** in overall government spending. When the present administration took office in 2000, the percentage was 18.5 percent. Today, it has risen to 20.3 percent. And who was it that said Bill Clinton was a tax and spend Liberal?

There seems to be a consensus within the Louisiana Congressional Delegation that the federal deficit can be cut in half within the next five years. Come on, fellows. The present deficit is at an all-time high. In the present proposed budget, there are 150 program cuts. But these cuts reduce the budget less than 0.7 percent. Hardly much of a difference. And remember that certain budget increases, particularly entitlement programs, are "locked in." So when you do the math, this year's federal budget actually **INCREASES** by 4 percent.

Let's take a look at some of the departments. The Education Department in Washington has seen its budget doubled since the present administration took over. The Commerce Department has increased its budget by 25.3 percent. And remember the rhetoric on the Energy Department during the Gingrich Revolution? This is the department that should be brought to its knees and pushed to the wayside. Today, in just five years, the Energy Department's budget has increased by 35 percent. And doesn't Congress keep playing

these “phony reduction” games? A proposed 10 percent increase will be made in a department, and some House or Senate committee will cut this down to 8 percent. This is supposed to be “slashing the budget,” or a decrease, when actually it’s a significant increase. But Congress also uses some “voodoo accounting” through the use of what they call the “baseline.” This financial juggling assumes that even though Congress does nothing and there are no increases, the budget will automatically go up. If this were allowed to happen in the Louisiana Legislature, editorial writers and talk show hosts would be up in arms hollering from the rafters.

Average folks like us think that there is one budget vote each year, and that this one vote sets the spending amounts for the following months. Not so. In fact, the budget in Washington is generally passed in the spring, yet there are as many as 13 additional appropriations bills that follow up the main budget into the fall.

The initial appropriations legislation is supposed to set the rule on how different departments spend their money. But these rules are routinely broken and the “smoke and mirrors” are used to add additional spending, often significantly above what was initially passed. And the emergency spending distinction has been routinely abused. We know right now that money is needed for both Iraq and Afghanistan in the years to come. But this isn’t included in the normal budget, and is subsequently included in “emergency spending allocations.”

There is a conservative caucus headed up by Indiana Congressman Mike Pence(R) that made a recent attempt to set rules that could not be broken. Only one member of the Louisiana Delegation is part of this effort – newly elected Congressman Bobby Jindal. The effort from this group was marginally successful in putting a few restrictions in the budget that passed a few weeks ago. But don’t count on much “holding the line.” In the months to come, we will watch the budget continue to grow and grow.

What we get back home, is lots of pontification. I remember one story about members of the state’s congressional delegation trying to talk a potential candidate into running for an open seat. After much cajoling, he decided not to be a candidate. “No, I don’t think I’ll run,” he said. “Congress seems to be filled with nothing but hypocrites.” “Well you may be right,” they responded, “But there’s always room for one more.”

And I’ve always liked the candidate who rants and raves about Washington, saying, “It’s nothing but a cesspool up there.” But some how or other, once he or she gets up there, it becomes a hot tub.

So in summary, here’s a quick political quiz on labels for all you junkies out there. Which major political party in Washington is spending money like water, creating new welfare entitlements, rapidly expanding the power of the federal government and launching idealistic wars of liberation around the globe?

Answer? Both of them!

THE SCHIAVO CASE

Somehow, there's just got to be a better way. The sight of Congress and the President meeting in the early morning hours to accentuate the sufferings of the Schiavo family was unsettling to say the least. What about the thousands of less publicized American families who face these same gut-wrenching decisions every day? Are they now told to run to Washington and try to obtain a last-minute reprieve? All this commotion over this one tragic woman rightly deserves our sympathy, and our prayers. But congressional and presidential intervention in the middle of the night?

Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. I think removing Terri Schiavo's feeding tube so she dies a slow death through starvation and dehydration, all supposedly in the name of mercy, is both brutal and barbaric. That's not the way her life should end.

Unfortunately, the issue is not one of "the right to die." We're not sure what Terri Schiavo would have wanted. She left nothing in writing, said nothing to her parents, and all we have to go by are the claims by her husband. From what I've read, Terri Schiavo is in no physical pain and she has parents who are willing and able to care for her.

Doesn't the burden of proof seem skewed and out of sync? Where should the greater burden of proof fall on the courts? To end a life or to allow that life to continue, even though it may be damaged? Do I understand that Terri Schiavo is going to be allowed to die because the legal system could not prove that she wanted to live? Shouldn't it be the other way around?

The circus atmosphere that surrounds this case ought to be troubling to us all. An ABC news poll showed that 78 percent of those responding would not want to be kept alive if they were in Terri Schiavo's condition. But this isn't a case of majority rules, or even what seems reasonable.

One of the biggest functions of government is to safeguard the lives of all its citizens. But Terri Schiavo cannot speak for herself. There is no right answer to this. Because of her parents' wavering commitment, I would have voted, as either a Legislator or a Judge, to let her live. But the intervention by Congress in the early morning hours was a grotesque spectacle of pandering and grand standing. There just has to be a better way.

“There's night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, brother, all sweet things; there's likewise a wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, brother; who would wish to die?”~ George Borrow ~

“I used to trouble about what life was for -- now being alive seems sufficient reason.”~ Joanna Field ~

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown