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February 19, 2010

# On Fiscal Conservative Hypocrites

By **David Paul Kuhn**

The majority party was pushing the largest entitlement expansion since the Great Society. The minority attempted byzantine legislative maneuvers to obstruct the vote. The majority never relented, even taking unprecedented action to ram the bill through Congress.

This was not 2009 but 2003. Republicans controlled the White House and Congress. And with that power they passed the \$400 billion Medicare prescription drug bill.

Fast forward to February 2010. Here is Missouri Republican Sen. Kit Bond railing against Barack Obama: "While pretending to get serious about our spiraling deficit there is nothing in the budget to tackle the greatest threat – runaway entitlement spending."

Bond was one of the 42 Republican senators who voted for the historic Medicare entitlement expansion.

The 2003 Medicare bill was not simply any vote. It enlarged a signature program of active-state liberalism (a.k.a.- big government). On a major piece of legislation, GOP lawmakers had to choose between principle and party. And many of today's Republicans chose party.

Republicans were proud back then. That December, not long after George W. Bush signed the bill, then-Republican Majority Leader Bill Frist was on "Hardball." Chris Mathews asked, "What was your biggest achievement this year?"

Frist: "I would have to say Medicare. Eleven months ago, the odds of getting a Medicare prescription drug [bill] through were probably 400-to-one, 500-to-one. ... So that clearly is our biggest single accomplishment, if you look at the last 30 years in this country."

A \$400 billion entitlement expansion as the "biggest single accomplishment" in three decades? Yes, that came from a Republican leader.

Little more than six years later, this ugly episode in GOP governance is instructive. Many of the Republicans who backed the historic big government bill are shamelessly sanctimonious about spending today.

Take a look at the Senate primary race in Arizona. Former Rep. JD Hayworth is challenging John McCain from the right. Hayworth has written that McCain's tenure is "not the record of a true conservative, much less a fiscal conservative."

Hayworth voted for the Medicare bill. McCain voted against it.

Fiscal conservative hypocrisy is so rampant we take it for granted. This is Eric Cantor, a Republican House leader, at a press conference two months ago: "Once again we see the Democrats asking to incur more debt at the same time they are claiming to be fiscally responsible; another day where it is more of, 'Do as I say, not as I do.'"

Ahem. Cantor lobbied hard for the Medicare bill. And he too voted for it.

Republican Senate leader John Boehner has been a relentless critic of Democratic spending. For years Boehner has said and written statements like this: "Will we take the initiative to make the necessary yet difficult choices to save Medicare, or will we become the political equivalent of the ostrich, sticking our head in the sand?"

When Republicans had their big chance in power to make "difficult choices" on big government, Boehner also chose the \$400 billion bill.

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"To vote for something that large, and then say we have to do something to control entitlements is hypocritical," said Tom Schatz, a leading fiscal conservative watchdog.

The hypocrisy does not stop there. Republican leaders have hammered Democrats for attempting to "ram through" their health care bill, highlighting untoward bribes.

Flashback: It's 6 a.m. on a Saturday morning in 2003. The traditional 15-minute roll call vote is extended for two hours and 51 minutes. The Medicare bill was heading to a 218 to 216 defeat. Key arms were twisted. Promises of campaign money and support were made. It became a 220 to 215 victory.

The drug bill episode also included its share of Democratic double standards. Democratic leaders like Harry Reid lecture Republicans today about obstructionist tactics. But Democratic leaders attempted a filibuster and murkier parliamentary maneuvers to kill the Medicare bill.

This is why the drug bill captures both parties' hypocrisy. It explains why we have millions of conservatives more aligned to the Tea Party movement than to Republicans. It's why we have more independents than Democrats or Republicans. It's why a recent CNN poll found nearly two-thirds of Americans want a major third party.

It's also why Republican recriminations on spending today, from Boehner to Cantor to onetime Bush advisors, sound like sophism. We are the summation of our actions. And both parties' actions brought us to this crushing debt.

Lest we forget, fiscal conservative hypocrisy was not an aberration of the Bush presidency. Ronald Reagan never cut entitlements, even as the national debt nearly tripled on his watch.

Today, even with Republicans out of power, we read the same stories every year. A February 2009 McClatchy headline: "[GOP hates earmarks – except the ones its members sponsor.](#)" A February 2010 Politico headline: "[Fiscal hawks balk at budget cuts.](#)"

Americans crave leaders from both parties, who will sit down together and take the hard stands.

But until those leaders emerge, we will likely suffer the fiscal hypocrites. A Democratic president who said "I don't" believe in big government in the same 2009 budget address that heralded the return of big government. And we will suffer the Republicans who lecture, "do as I say, not as I do" about spending, without recalling what they did and what they said.

Last year, Obama raised the issue of getting "serious about entitlement reform." Boehner's office aptly responded to a reporter, "talk is cheap in Washington." Indeed. But Republicans too often forget how much their cheap talk has cost us as well.

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