REPORT ON RESOLUTION PROVIDING FOR CONSIDERATION OF H.R. 6, HIGHER EDUCATION AMENDMENTS OF 1998

Mr. HASTINGS of Washington (during the Special order of Mr. OWENS), from the Committee on Rules, submitted a privileged report (Rept. No. 105–499) on the resolution (H. Res. 411) providing for consideration of the bill (H.R. 6) to extend the authorization of programs under the Higher Education Act of 1965, and for other purposes, which was referred to the House Calendar and ordered to be printed.

HIGHER EDUCATION ASSISTANCE ACT

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. DEAL of Georgia). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 1997, the gentleman from New York (Mr. OWENS) is recognized for 60 minutes.

Mr. OWENS. Mr. Speaker, today is April 28. Tomorrow will be April 29. A major event will take place on the floor of the House of Representatives.

Tomorrow we shall begin the consideration of the Higher Education Assistance Act, the reauthorization of the Higher Education Assistance Act. I think that I would like to proclaim to the American people, to the public, to everybody who cares in this Nation, that this is no small event.

Reauthorization of the Higher Education Assistance Act is a major event. We only do it once every 5 years. And the role of the Federal Government in higher education has been no small one. It is very important. In fact, it is quite unfortunate that there has been so little discussion and so little debate up to this point. We should have had more dialogue, more interaction with the people who are involved, students, faculties, presidents of colleges. It has been a very quiet reauthorization process.

I have been here now for 16 years, and this is the third reauthorization I have gone through, and I have never seen it so quiet. It is part of the process that has been forced upon us by the leadership, the Republican majority leadership here in the House, that everything is kept at a low profile, everything important is kept at a very low profile.

This session, this second year of the 105th Congress, the art of forcing the low profile, the art of forcing a low visibility for important issues has been perfected. Never before have we been in a session where we have had as many recesses as we have had this year, as short a workweek as we have had this year.

A decision was made by the ruling Republican majority that the less visibility this Congress had, the less the people of the United States see their Legistature at work, the better. So we have minimized a very important discussion on education, as we minimize all discussions. We are in a situation now where we have not even passed a budget. And I suppose one is being prepared in secret like everything else. It is a process where most things go on behind closed doors, and very little participation is encouraged.

In the case of the Higher Education Assistance Act, I found it very difficult as a member of the committee, I am a member of the Committee on Education and the Workforce, and I found it difficult to find out how things were moving as the preparation of this very important piece of legislation took place at the committee level. I have heard my colleagues in other committees complain about the same process. Even the Members of Congress are not invited to participate. We have to sort of force our way into the dialogue. Therefore, it is not surprising that the same ruling majority here does not provide opportunities for the public to know very much about what is going on, the voters.

I suppose this is a result of what happened in the 104th Congress in terms of a very well-publicized, highly visible agenda in the form of the Contract with America. We had maximum debate. The Democratic Minority had a chance to answer the proposals put forth by the Republican majority. We had out on the table the intentions of the Republican party, especially in the area of education. They clearly had intentions that were in confrontation with the majority of the American people. They wanted to abolish the Department of Education. They wanted to drastically cut certain education programs, even cut Head Start, school lunches.

It was a situation where we appreciated the honesty of the majority. The majority was honest. They put their cards on the table; and the American people, in their wisdom, rejected them. They knew that these ideas had been rejected as we approached the election date in November of 1996. They knew that with respect to education, they had miscalculated, and they ran very fast and used their power to make amends.

At the last minute during the appropriations process, the Republican majority increased the budget for education programs by $4 billion. Whereas they had been threatening to cut as much as $4 billion in the previous year in 1995, in 1996 they increased it by the same amount, $4 billion increase, instead of a cut. So they understood, they understood through the focus groups, they understood through the public opinion polls all of the barometers that we use to measure opinions and to determine where the voters are. They understood that the commonsense wisdom of the American people was not with them.

Education is a high priority, and anyone who threatens to abolish the Department of Education and greatly cripple the involvement of the Federal Government in education matters has to pay the price for that kind of position. Fortunately for them, and unfortunate for the Democratic Minority, they changed radically at the last minute, and they went out, after giving us a $4 billion increase in education, they went out as the friends of education, as the champions of education.

Unfortunately, in this 105th Congress, that is not the case. The kind of last-minute conversion did not carry over. We are back to business as usual when it comes to the Republican majority. First of all, they have the old proposals for school vouchers and privatization of education on the table with greater gusto than ever before. Block granting and vouchers and all of those old items that did not sit well with the American people in the last Congress have been resurrected. We do not hear any more of the talk of the abolishment of the Department of Education. The extremism is not there anymore. They do not put it out on the table.

If they feel the Department of Education should be abolished, then that is a covert matter; they do not talk about it in public. If they feel that Head Start should be cut, that is a covert matter.

They actually have been very civil in this process of reauthorizing the Higher Education Assistance Act. The Higher Education Assistance Act has come forward. It will go to the floor tomorrow from the committee. And the Republican majority on that committee is to be commended, I suppose, for not proposing any drastic cuts. There are no drastic cuts in the previous higher education programs.

We should rejoice. We should applaud this. Let us give credit where credit is due. The jackals of the 104th Congress that wanted to cut everything have left, basically, higher education assistance alone. We should be rejoicing. And I do rejoice.

On the other hand, as I said, on the occasion of the markup of this important piece of legislation, it is most unfortunate that given the fact that we reauthorize higher education assistance acts only once every 5 years, in a 5-year period, whatever we legislate tomorrow, whatever comes out of our House tomorrow and goes to the Senate and conference and signed by the President, that will be in effect for 5 years.

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It is unfortunate that a bill which is going to carry us through the next 5 years into the 21st century and beyond is really a status quo bill. We can applaud the fact that they did not cut anything, we can applaud the fact that there was no attempt to roll back history, but we cannot applaud the fact that there are no innovations in the bill tomorrow, there is nothing new, there is nothing that looks at the 21st century and says that our thrust should be different, our commitment to higher education should be enhanced, we should meet some of the problems that have surfaced and are clear on the