

DEMOCRATS ON CHAIRMAN BURTON'S COMMITTEE JUSTIFIED IN REFUSING TO VOTE FOR IMMUNITY

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Michigan (Mr. CONYERS) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. CONYERS. Mr. Speaker, several hours ago, the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight gave a vote of no confidence to the campaign finance investigation being headed by my friend, the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. BURTON). The committee declined to immunize four witnesses and haul them before his committee. As a past chairman of that committee, I can tell you that what the committee did today was the only course of action they could take.

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My Democratic colleagues were not asking for much. They simply wanted procedures for subpoenas that would give them a chance to object and force a committee vote before such subpoenas could be issued. They were willing to negotiate, but Chairman BURTON was not.

I am sorry to say this, but Chairman BURTON'S recent actions have discredited the Committee on House Oversight of the Congress, which is supposed to set the example for fair investigative procedure. Never in my tenure as chairman of that committee, not once, did the minority complain that a major investigation was unfair or conducted without their full involvement.

Consider the causes for our embarrassment. More than 600 subpoenas have been unilaterally issued, without one of them ever having a committee vote or the involvement of members of the committee; a stubborn and continuing refusal to subpoena any witnesses requested by the Democratic members of the committee; a tasteless decision to release the private conversations between Mr. Hubbell and his wife, that had no connection to the subject matter that the committee was investigating; the misleading editing of the tape transcripts, which should have never been released in the first place, forcing a public rebuke by the Speaker himself for the embarrassment caused to the House of Representatives; and, finally, growing evidence that the committee may be improperly and perhaps illegally coordinating its investigation with that of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, which, by Federal law, is supposed to remain secret.

So the failure of the committee's investigation carries an important lesson for all of us in Congress: The concerns of every member of a committee, especially an investigative committee, cannot be ignored or shunted aside by procedural maneuvers.

I am hopeful that my colleagues will keep these lessons in mind as we move forward from the ashes of the BURTON investigation.

PRESERVING THE INTEGRITY OF THE BILL OF RIGHTS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. SESSIONS). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 1997, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. EDWARDS) is recognized for 37 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Mr. EDWARDS. Mr. Speaker, in three weeks the gentleman from Oklahoma (Mr. ISTOOK) will try to amend the U.S. Bill of Rights, the sacred document that has served America for well over 200 years.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the American experiment in democracy is our Nation's religious freedom. Because of our Bill of Rights, America is not torn by religious wars.

In contrast to the religious strife in Northern Ireland and in the Middle East, Americans are at peace. In contrast to Islamic fundamentalist states that use government to force religion upon its citizens, America's Founding Fathers had the wisdom to write a Bill of Rights that separated the power of government from the freedom of religion.

These and others are powerful reasons why the Bill of Rights has never been amended in our Nation's 207 years; never, never has been amended since the Bill of Rights was adopted 207 years ago.

Yet Mr. ISTOOK not only wants to tamper with the Bill of Rights, he wants to rewrite the first 16 words of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, those words that say "Congress shall make no laws respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Now, Mr. ISTOOK calls his bill the religious freedom amendment. I would suggest that James Madison and our Founding Fathers beat Mr. ISTOOK to the punch by just over 200 years. The real religious freedom amendment is called the First Amendment of our Constitution. I believe Mr. ISTOOK'S bill should frankly be called the religious freedom destruction act.

It is amazing that some of the same people who do not entrust the Federal Government to deliver our mail want government involved in something as sacred as our children's and grandchildren's prayers. To change the Bill of Rights for any reason is a grave undertaking. To change it for reasons that simply do not exist is wrong.

Mr. ISTOOK bases his amendment on several myths. His arguments are a temple built on a false foundation.

Myth number one: Mr. ISTOOK alleges that students cannot pray in public schools. Nothing could be further from the truth. The law of this land allows students to pray before, after, and even during school. What the law prohibits, as it should, as intended by our Founding Fathers, is that government-sponsored prayers should be prohibited.

Time Magazine on April 27, 1998, and CNN have recently reported there are thousands of prayer and Bible groups that have been formed in public schools

all across America in just the last few years.

Mr. Speaker, I enclose for the RECORD the article from Time Magazine of April 27 record entitled "Spiriting Prayer into School."

Mr. Speaker, let me take several excerpts from this Time Magazine article. "Politicians may bicker about bringing back prayer, but in fact it is already a major presence, thanks to the many after-school prayer clubs." The article goes on to say that "available statistics are approximate, but they suggest that there are clubs in as many as one out of every four public schools in the country. In some areas, the tally is much higher."

Later the article says this: "The resulting Equal Access Act of 1984 required any federally-funded secondary school to permit religious meetings if the schools allowed other clubs not related to curriculum, such as public-service Key Clubs. The crucial rule was that the prayer clubs had to be voluntary, student-run, and not convene during class time."

The article goes on to point out the Supreme Court in 1990 sustained this law by a vote of 8 to 1.

Let me read additional excerpts from the Time Magazine article. "Evangelicals had already seized the moment. Within a year of the 1990 court decision, prayer clubs bloomed spontaneously on a thousand high school campuses. Fast on their heels came adult organizations dedicated to encouraging more. Proffitt's, Tennessee-based organization, First Priority, founded in 1995, coordinates inter-church groups in 162 cities, working with clubs in 3,000 schools. The San Diego-based National Network of Youth Ministries has launched what is called Challenge 2000, which pledges to bring the Christian gospel to 'every kid on every secondary campus in every community in our Nation by the year 2000.' It also promotes a phenomenon called 'See You at the Pole,' encouraging Christian students country-wide to gather around their school flagpoles on the third Wednesday of each September; last year, 3 million students participated."

Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that this article points out very clearly that Mr. ISTOOK'S allegation that somehow we simply do not have prayer at our public schools does not bear out with today's facts.

The Time article also says, "Says Doug Clark," quoting him, "field director of the National Network of Youth Ministries, 'Our energy is being poured into what kids can do voluntarily and on their own. That seems to us to be where God is working.'"

They then go on in the article finally to say, "For now, the prospects for prayer clubs seem unlimited."

The doom of Mr. ISTOOK'S predictions simply is not there.

Mr. Speaker, the fact is that students can pray silently in the classroom, or out loud over the lunch table. For anyone to suggest that prayer is not alive