

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM ACT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Virginia (Mr. WOLF) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. WOLF. Mr. Speaker, 6 months ago today President Clinton signed the International Religious Freedom Act into law. The law mandates that within 120 days of enactment individuals shall be named to the Commission on International Religious Freedom created by the bill.

It has been 6 months since enactment of the bill, 2 months past the deadline, and the White House has still not named its three commissioners. Congress has done its part, but we are still waiting for the administration. When will the White House get serious about implementing this legislation?

In early February, the President spoke before a crowd of religious and political leaders from around the world at the National Prayer Breakfast. He praised the bill and he said he was proud to have signed it. But where is the implementation? Where is the enforcement? Where is the commitment?

The commission's first report on the condition of religious freedom around the world is due on May 1, this Saturday. Because the administration has wasted so much time in making the appointments, there is no way that the commission will meet that date, and it is unlikely that we will see a report this year. Another year wasted while people are being maimed, tortured, beaten, jailed and killed on account of their faith.

I believe it was the administration's intention to miss the May 1 deadline for the commission's report. This ensures this issue will not get a serious examination by an independent entity as the bill intends. It ensures that the administration can continue to fudge the facts instead of taking serious actions against countries that refuse to protect the human rights of religious believers.

The administration never really liked this bill. Secretary Albright spoke out against the bill. Assistant Secretary Eizenstat criticized the bill. But once Congress overwhelmingly, Republicans and Democrats, passed the bill and sent it to the White House, the President had no choice but to sign it. Then he praised it. Now they are stonewalling it on the implementation. All talk, no action. That is how I would describe the action of this administration with regard to human rights: All talk and no action.

The administration's record on promoting human rights is miserable. China's Catholic priests and bishops are still in jail today and have been in there for decades, for decades, and nobody has been appointed to this commission; Protestant pastors and lay people, decades, and nobody has been appointed to the commission. Worshipers being imprisoned, fined.

Freedom House has said the already intense persecution of the underground church in China has intensified since mid-1998. There was no mention of this during the recent summit with the Chinese Premier. Neither was there any discussion about the fact that China has stopped all dialogue with the Dalai Lama over the future status of Tibet, or the Chinese Government-sponsored campaign to encourage Tibetan Buddhists to become atheists.

And I was in Tibet last year, and the persecution of the Buddhists in Tibet is horrible. It is more horrible than anybody realizes. And yet no one from this administration has taken the time to go to Tibet to see how the conditions are.

The church in Hong Kong is being squeezed. The war in Sudan, very little diplomatic effort, 2 million people, mainly Christians, who have been killed for their faith in the last 15 years, and this administration has done nothing. They cannot even appoint the people to the commission that we all passed in a bipartisan manner.

In Vietnam the situation is no better. And the administration has done nothing, nor have they appointed the people. In India, Pakistan, Indonesia, East Timor, atrocities taking place, and they do nothing.

There is so much going on around the world. There is no excuse for this commission not to be given a chance to do its work. That is what Congress, Republican and Democrat, wanted, that is what the American people wanted when it passed the International Religious Freedom Act, which has strong bipartisan support.

The House leadership, both majority and minority leadership, found time to name the 6 commissioners, and the leadership on both sides of the aisle supported this commission. Why cannot the administration find time to appoint these people?

I hope the administration will at least move to appoint people to the commission, 120 days late, on International Religious Freedom. Too much time has been wasted. The lives of innocent people are at stake every day in China, every day in the Sudan, every day in East Timor, every day in Indonesia, and yet 120 days they have missed the deadline.

They are basically in violation of the law. They have had 6 months. Because this administration has taken so long, my guess is that they will appoint people who are weak and ineffectual on this issue.

Mr. Speaker, I hope I am wrong. And if I am wrong, I will be glad to say they have appointed good people and decent people who care deeply about this. But please appoint someone. Appoint someone so the Commission can begin its action.

MEDICARE MUST NOT BE
PRIVATIZED

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, many in Congress have been on a campaign to scare America's seniors into believing that Medicare is going bankrupt. They say Medicare must be privatized in order to save it. Once again, Medicare privatizers and their Medicare campaign are wrong. The trustees of the Medicare Trust Fund have just reported that Medicare will remain solvent through 2015, up from its earlier projection of 2008.

Those in Congress, the think tanks, and the Beltway pundits who want to privatize Medicare are wringing their hands over the trustees' latest report. They believe these new projections will lead Congress to do nothing towards reforming Social Security and Medicare. With the programs projected to last longer, we cannot rest on the our laurels, they say.

The real threat to Medicare, however, is not its alleged pending bankruptcy. That is not true. The real threat is a proposal just rejected by the National Medicare Commission to privatize Medicare and deliver it to the private insurance market.

Under a proposal soon to be introduced called premium support, Medicare would no longer pay directly for health care services. Instead, it would provide each senior with a voucher good for part of the premium for private coverage. Medicare beneficiaries could use their voucher to buy into the fee-for-service plan already in effect, sponsored by the Federal Government, or join a private HMO plan.

To encourage consumer price sensitivity, the voucher would track to the lowest cost private plan. Ostensibly, seniors would shop for the plan that best suits their needs, paying the balance of the premium and paying extra if they want higher quality health care. The proposal would create a system of health coverage but, most importantly, it would abandon Medicare's fundamental principle of egalitarianism.

Today, the Medicare program is income-blind. All seniors have access to the same level of quality care. The idea that vouchers would empower seniors to choose a health plan that best suits their needs is a myth. The reality is that seniors will be forced to accept whatever plan they can afford.

The goal of the Medicare Commission was to ensure the program's long-term solvency. The premium support proposal simply will not do that. Supporters of this voucher plan say it could shave 1 percent per year from the Medicare budget over the next few decades. But Bruce Vladeck, a former Medicare administrator, doubted it would save the Federal Government even one dime.

Efforts to privatize Medicare are, of course, nothing new. Medicare beneficiaries have long been able to enroll in private Medicare plans. Their experience, however, does not bode well in a full-fledged privatization effort.

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These managed care plans are already calling for higher government payments, they are dropping out of unprofitable markets, they are cutting back on benefits to America's elderly.

Managed care plans obviously are profit-driven and they simply do not tough it out when their profits are not realized. We learned this the hard way last year when 96 Medicare HMOs deserted more than 400,000 Medicare beneficiaries because the HMOs were not meeting their profit objectives.

Before Medicare was launched in 1965, more than one-half of the Nation's seniors had no health insurance. Private insurance was then the only option for the elderly. But insurers did not want seniors to join their plans because they knew that seniors would use their coverage. The private insurance market has changed considerably since then but it still avoids high-risk enrollees and, whenever possible, dodges the bill for high cost medical services.

The problem is not malice or greed, it is the expectation that private insurers can serve two masters: the bottom line and the common good. Logically looking at the bottom line, our system leaves 43 million people without health insurance, 11 million of whom are children. Only Medicare can insure the elderly and disabled population because the private market has failed to do so.

If we privatize Medicare, we are telling America that not all seniors deserve the same level of health care. We are betting on a private insurance system that puts its own private interests ahead of health care quality and ahead of a balanced Federal budget.

The goal is simple, Mr. Speaker. Let us keep Medicare the successful public program it has always been.

THE PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO KNOW

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. HASTINGS of Washington). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Arizona (Mr. HAYWORTH) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. HAYWORTH. Mr. Speaker, I rise this afternoon, and first let me offer a debt of gratitude to my friend from Ohio who, in very Orwellian fashion, has offered the rhetoric of fear rather than facts that we will hear in Campaign 2000. Indeed, it is very revealing to now hear the "Mediscare" tactics of the left, to deny the fact that the very reason the Medicare trustees say that Medicare's life has been lengthened was because of the new majority's plan to save Medicare that we successfully enacted after the jihad that was waged against us, politically speaking, in 1996 with a liberal Mediscare plan.

It is also worth noting, while we are in the neighborhood, Mr. Speaker, that the bipartisan commission, headed by the gentleman from Louisiana in the other body, and the gentleman from California with whom I am pleased to serve on the House Committee on Ways and Means offered a variety of avenues that give seniors, our most honored citizens, a variety of choices. It is revealing that there are those who would like to limit the freedom of Americans to make choices in their own interests.

But I rise today, Mr. Speaker, to speak of another matter that goes directly to the core of our survival as a constitutional republic. It is, Mr. Speaker, the people's right to know. Mr. Speaker, in the very near future, it is my understanding that Johnny Chung will testify before the House Committee on Government Reform about contributions, political contributions the Communist Chinese Government made to the Clinton/Gore campaign and to the Democratic National Committee in 1996. It has been interesting, Mr. Speaker, to note the coverage, or perhaps lack thereof, of this important issue in the Nation's press.

Now, to be sure, Mr. Speaker, I understand full well the nature and the scope of the first amendment to the Constitution, Congress shall make no law abridging freedom of the press, nor would I ever advocate such a dereliction or disruption of our first amendment rights. But it is fair, Mr. Speaker, in the marketplace of ideas to ask my former colleagues in television, where will they be when Johnny Chung comes before the congressional committee to testify about these contributions?

We should also say in passing, a tip of the rhetorical hat is necessary to many publications, whether the New York Times, the Washington Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, many mainstream publications who have chronicled the abuses.

But now, Mr. Speaker, it is time for my former colleagues in television to step up, specifically those news networks that are available via cable with 24-hour-a-day coverage. Without trying to set their agenda, but in the spirit of constructive criticism and open dialogue in a free republic, I would challenge the cable news networks, I would challenge public broadcasting, to follow the example of C-SPAN.

And from this vantage point I can say, Mr. Speaker, that we congratulate C-SPAN on 20 years of service to the American people, bringing to the people of our Nation an unvarnished, straight conduit of what happens in the halls of Congress, what happens on the floor of this House and what happens in the many committee rooms.

But I would welcome far more exposure of these hearings. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, one is tempted to look at the recent promotional campaign of the Public Broadcasting Service and the rhetorical question that is asked: "If PBS won't do it, who will?"

Indeed, I think of the recent past when I was a private citizen in the 1980s, the mid- to late-1980s, seeing on public television gavel-to-gavel coverage of the confirmation hearings of Judge Bork, the confirmation hearings eventually of Mr. Justice Thomas, and all the mainstream media scrutiny. How much more important it is then, Mr. Speaker, that the media devote its considerable energies and its agenda-setting ability to checking into these disturbing allegations that go to the very fabric of our constitutional Republic.

For, Mr. Speaker, if there are those both within and outside government who seek to influence decisions and policy for another government that wishes us ill, the consequences for our national survival are grave indeed.

COMPREHENSIVE ELECTRIC RESTRUCTURING BILL

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. STEARNS) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. STEARNS. Mr. Speaker, deregulation of the airlines, natural gas, railroads, telecommunications, and trucking industries yields annual savings equal to nearly 1 percent of America's gross domestic product. This Congress, we will attempt to craft a measure that will finally and successfully unleash competition and savings from utility reform, electric deregulation.

In recent years, competition has replaced regulation for the electric power industry in a number of nations, including the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Norway, Chile and Argentina. Many took a very long-term approach to this process. The United States faces a unique situation in that our electric power industry is largely already privatized. So we must focus on alternating our current system and effectively fostering more competition.

This should not be done through a Federal mandate. Clearly, we would be wise to make the State-mandated restructuring more efficient instead of imposing a separate Federal mandate. I see the ideal measure as one that fosters competition, avoids Federal mandates and lowers rates for all consumers. To create this legislation, we must eliminate outdated laws, inject fairness into the process, and delineate the proper roles of the Federal Government and State governments. But do not misunderstand me: Reforming the electric industry is no simple matter. This is an enormous undertaking. Congress considers the livelihoods of entire industries constitutional questions and the interests of the entire rate-paying public in addressing this very complex issue. Accordingly, we must address these points to fully realize the benefits of energy reform. Every consumer must benefit from this deregulation, not just the large industrial users of electricity. I am concerned that any