PERSONAL EXPLANATION

HON. DEAN HELLER

OF NEVADA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, December 22, 2010

Mr. HELLER. Madam Speaker, on rollcall No. 657, I was unavoidably detained. Had I been present, I would have voted ''no.''

PERSONAL EXPLANATION

HON. RUBÉN HINOJOSA

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, December 22, 2010

Mr. HINOJOSA. Madam Speaker, I regret that I was unavoidably detained. Had I been present, I would have voted ''aye'' on rollcall No. 660 and 661.

REFLECTIONS

HON. JOHN M. SPRATT, JR.

OF SOUTH CAROLINA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, December 22, 2010

Mr. SPRATT. Madam Speaker, when I was elected to Congress 28 years ago, it was the fulfillment of a life-long ambition. But I had never served in elective office before, and frankly, I wondered how well it would wear—all the back-slapping and glad-handing and garrulous talk.

My first revelation was to find that this House is not made up of back-slappers and glad-handlers. It is made up of members who work hard to get here, many out of patriotic purpose, hoping that they in their time can contribute something worthy of this great country. Most of the members are extroverted and energetic, and have to be, to get elected every two years.

At Davidson College, my alma mater; at Oxford on scholarship; at Yale Law; in the Pentagon as a young analyst, and as a practicing lawyer, I made many good friends, but few as good as the friends I have made here. Of all the things I will miss, I will miss most the fellowship and camaraderie.

I first experienced Congress as a young Army officer in the Pentagon, working for the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) on defense contractors in financial distress, mainly Lockheed Aircraft Corporation. As staff at the Department of Defense, we did a lot of work that I thought staff at Congress should be doing, particularly if Congress hoped to be a co-equal branch. The greatest difference between Congress then, from '69 through '71, and Congress 12 years later, when I came here in 1983 as an elected member, was staff. Committee staff and members' staff both had grown greatly, in quality and quantity. As a result, today's Congress is better staffed and equipped, more effective and independent, and a lot closer to being co-equal.

I have had the good fortune of working with talented staff in my office and on the committees where I have served; and as I leave, I thank them all, because anything I have done of significance, I did with their good help.

My first quest in Congress was to get a good committee assignment. After two days of bidding, I had struck at every option and never scored a hit. I was at a loss for where to go when Tony Coelho sought me out and offered me a seat on the House Armed Services Committee.

The HASC dove-tailed nicely with my district because the Fifth District includes Shaw Air Force Base. But as important as Shaw is, I learned that other members had defense interests far larger than mine. Since I was not carrying water for a large defense constituency, I had the independence to take on troubled systems, like the DIVAD, the Division Air Defense gun, which my amendment effectively killed; or the MX , which I voted to stop at 50 missiles, or binary chemical weapons, which my amendments helped side-track and eventually derail.

In selecting members for every committee, the leadership tries to match the member's interests at home with his committee in the House. That's natural and to be expected, but we should also select members for ballast—members free to act, ask hard questions, and offer amendments.

At the time I took my seat on Armed Services, the nation was engaged in the biggest defense build-up in our peace-time history, and the committee chairman presiding over this build-up was well past his prime. Elderly and weak, he could barely be heard over the din of noise in the committee room. When Les Aspin let it be known that he was going to run for the chair, and leap-frog six senior members, I was among the first to offer support. We prevailed, and over the next five years, Aspin allowed me to set up and chair two panels, the first on Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, and the second, on the nuclear weapons complex. Though both were important, neither was receiving the attention it deserved by the committee or any of its subcommittees, due to other issues or a lack of interest in these.

Because of our oversight, we were able to pare back the SDI budget; shift funds from strategic missile defense to theater missile defense, and wipe out a few far-fetched systems altogether. For example, my amendment deleted funding for the space-based interceptor. In the press release accompanying passage of the defense bill, the headline read: ''House Takes the Star out of Star Wars.'' President Reagan did not find it amusing; he vetoed the defense bill, but after many years and billions of dollars, our cuts have stood the test of time.

After two years, we had to return SDI to the Research and Development Subcommittee, so we set up a new panel dealing with nuclear facilities. The Cold War had enabled our nuclear complex to put off environmental and safety issues. To deal with these problems, we shifted nearly a billion dollars from Defense to Energy, and saved over a billion dollars by stopping the Special Isotope Separator, a laser-driven process to produce plutonium, even though the Secretary of Energy acknowledged we were ''awash in plutonium.''

We scored a number of such successes, but the most satisfying took place largely off stage where we made the case for a moratorium on nuclear testing. We first helped Representative. Kopetski draft a bill calling for an immediate cessation of testing, and we then drafted an alternative that we thought the Senate would pass allowing for a few final tests before declaring a moratorium. We proposed the alternative to Senators Exon and Hatfield, who took up its support and moved it to passage through the Energy and Water Appropriations bill. This saved the moratorium from being vetoed because the super-collider was also in this bill, and President Bush wanted it to be funded.

Another satisfying measure: my substitute to the war powers resolution authorizing President Bush to use force against Iraq. This substitute authorized the force needed to search for weapons of mass destruction, but before going further, it called on the president to seek the sanction of the U.N. Security Council, as his father had done, and to come back to Congress with the case for a broader use of force, which would be received with a fast-track guaranty, an up-or-down vote in the House and Senate. My substitute did not prevail, but it drew 157 votes, and gave many members a position they could uphold.

I made my mark in the House on defense, but during most of my 28 years, my greatest concern was the budget and chronic deficits. In 1997, I was elected by the Democratic Caucus as ranking member of the Budget Committee. I ran against opposition and told the caucus that if I was elected, we would ''finish the job'' of balancing the budget that began with President Clinton's first budget. About the same time, Erskine Bowles returned to Washington to be the President's Chief of Staff, and when he paid me a courtesy call, he told me that he had the same understanding with the President. With the President's encouragement, the four budget principals in the House and Senate began meeting, and by May 1997 we had hammered out a balanced budget agreement which worked. By 1998, the budget was in balance for the first time in 30 years.

President Bush took office with an advantage few presidents have enjoyed, a budget in balance, in the black by $236 billion the year before. I was invited to Austin, Texas with 12 other members to discuss defense issues with the incoming president. I used my time to encourage President Bush to apply the surplus in Social Security to buy outstanding Treasury debt, and reduce Treasury debt held by the public. This would increase net national saving, lower public debt, and be a long step toward making Social Security solvent. The president-elect professed interest but not for long, and by 2004, the deficit was over $400 billion.

President George W. Bush was greeted as he took office by a surplus of $200 billion. When he left office in 2009, the surplus was gone, and the deficit projected for that fiscal year was $1.2 trillion.

As I leave Congress, the deficit is hovering around a trillion dollars and while improving, current deficits exceed the deficits of the mid-1990s by every measure. But the process of resolving both is basically the same: everything must be on the table and everyone must be at the table.

As the menu for such a meeting, the President's Fiscal Commission has submitted a plate full of recommendations. I served on the commission and voted for the report, even though I do not support all of its proposals. I cast an ''aye'' because our country is in desperate need of a plan for balancing the budget and making Social Security and Medicare solvent. These will not be popular—far from it—but as they shore up our economy, they will prove their worth and raise the standing of Congress in the eyes of our countrymen. I am