



When Ignorance Isn't Bliss

To cut through the din, here are five congressional votes everyone should know—straight from the you-can't-make-this-up file.

BETWEEN SEAN HANNITY, BILL O'REILLY, CHRIS Matthews, John Ashcroft's terror warnings, "The Bachelor," the final episode of "The Sopranos" and those incessant injury lawyer commercials, voters in November are somehow expected to cast informed votes for Congress. We are supposed to base our decision on talking points parroted to us by inane TV reporters or, worse, paid political ads.

Many people, of course, simply tune out and do not vote. Those who do head to the polls often vote with little knowledge of what their elected representatives are doing.

So, in an effort to cut through the din this year, here are five congressional votes that everyone in America should know about. They come straight from the you-can't-make-this-stuff-up file, and capture how soundbite politics hide the troubling reality behind conservatives' bumper-sticker slogans.

Pro-Defense: Facing increasing violence in Iraq, military commanders in Iraq asked Congress and the president to immediately fill shortages in protective body armor. Just four months after the president signed another massive tax cut for the wealthy, up to 51,000 troops were still not properly equipped for combat, with many begging friends and family at home to buy them makeshift armor. Responding to the crisis, Senator Chris Dodd (D-Conn.) sponsored a bill to immediately plug the shortage. He was voted down (Senate vote #376, October 2, 2003), and the results have been catastrophic. As a recent study circulating in the Army notes, up to one in four casualties in Iraq was due to poor protective gear.

Compassionate: With U.S. troops struggling to secure Iraq last summer, Congress and the president repeatedly praised soldiers' efforts and promised to provide them the best facilities possible. Yet, the White House budget that year proposed to cut \$1.5 billion out of military housing. Representative David Obey (D-Wisc.) came up with a simple solution: Slightly reduce the proposed tax cuts on the 200,000 Americans making \$1 million a year to fill the budget gap for the troops and their families. Instead of getting an \$88,000 tax cut, millionaires would receive an ample \$83,000 tax cut, and the troops' housing would be maintained. Obey's bill was voted down (House vote #324, June 26, 2003).

Tax Fairness: In 2002, the Bush administration terminated the tax on oil and chemical industry polluters that finances Superfund toxic cleanups. As the *New York Times* reported, the move effectively "shifted the bulk of [cleanup] costs from industry to taxpayers,"

allowing the president's corporate campaign donors to pollute without having to pay for it. Just two years later, the loss of tax revenues bankrupted Superfund, leaving it unable to maintain an adequate cleanup pace. In response, Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) offered an amendment to reinstate the Superfund tax. He was voted down. (Senate vote #45, March 11, 2004), and now more and more communities are forced to wait as toxic sites fester in their midst.

Patrotism: As the recession reached new lows in December 2002, the U.S. House of Representatives considered whether to continue rewarding companies with taxpayer subsidies, even if those same companies use those subsidies to send U.S. jobs overseas. The question was simple: During a jobs and deficit crisis, should the U.S. government's Export-Import Bank continue giving most of its \$15 billion a year to subsidize a slew of Fortune 500 companies that are reducing their U.S. workforce? But when Representative Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) offered a measure to curb the government hand-outs to corporate job exporters, he was voted down (House vote #120, May 1, 2002).

Clean Government: Halliburton, the oil company Vice President Dick Cheney ran, continues to receive billions in no-bid government contracts for work in Iraq, even after it was cited for overcharging taxpayers and providing unsanitary facilities to U.S. troops. At the same time, Cheney is receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars in deferred compensation from the company and holds roughly 400,000 Halliburton stock options. More troubling, internal memos now show that Cheney's office was directly coordinating Halliburton contracts. When the Congressional Research Service ruled the situation represented a "potential conflict of interest," the Senate considered legislation that would have forced the termination of the Cheney-Halliburton relationship. It was voted down (Senate vote #386, October 16, 2003).

No doubt, most Americans have heard more about the president's dog and jogging schedule than where their elected representatives came down on these votes. But that merely reflects the pathetic state of American journalism, not the gravity or consequences of the decisions. No matter how much we tell ourselves these votes and decisions don't matter, they do. No matter how many times reporters tell us semen-stained blue dresses and gossip are more important than lies about war, peace, poverty and corruption, they're not.

The sooner we wake up and demand accountability at the polls, the better. ■

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Black Journalism's Bright Light

VERNON JARRETT, WHO DIED ON MAY 23, WAS a black journalist who covered the African-American story so doggedly he became one of its major characters.

That story charts a journey through racial slavery, Jim Crow apartheid and on through the civil rights revolution, the black power movement, the rise of black elected officials and further still. It's a story with many twists and turns, and Jarrett chronicled many of its signposts.

At his May 29 funeral at Operation PUSH's Chicago headquarters, a large, multiracial audience listened respectfully as Jarrett was lovingly evoked and praised as yet another of those signposts. During his stint with the legendary *Chicago Defender*, where he got his start in 1946 after moving to Chicago from Paris, Tennessee, Jarrett covered most of the major stories of the civil rights movement. He also interviewed W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson and Martin Luther King Jr., among many others.

In 1970, he got a mainstream gig as the *Chicago Tribune's* first black columnist, and for 13 years he wrote about issues from a black perspective, with a leftist, pro-labor tilt that shocked readers of what was one of the Midwest's most conservative publications. He moved over to the rival *Chicago Sun-Times* in 1983.

Jarrett believed black journalists should not simply report on events but should serve the struggle for social justice. In 1987, for example, he commandeered the microphone at a memorial rally for his good friend, the late Chicago Mayor Harold Washington, and launched into an emotional speech that *astonished* the audience.

He was a *Sun-Times* columnist and board member, but Jarrett passionately urged those assembled to take action against the late mayor's "scheming" opponents. His actions were criticized severely as overstepping the bounds of professional propriety. He replied that his actions were perfectly reasonable. "I was loud and angry because I was mad as hell," he recalled in a 1995 interview. "They were trying to bury Harold's programs even before he was in the ground."

Jarrett never addressed his critics' point that his political passions were incongruent with journalistic objectivity. For him, pushing the politics of fairness was journalism's highest calling. Jarrett may have been out on a limb with his editors, but his beliefs were firmly rooted in the tradition from which he emerged.

Black journalism was born in a spirit of protest, and

that tradition has been a touchstone for many black activists who considered journalism a natural extension of their mission. Several of black America's most pivotal figures—from Frederick Douglass to Ida B. Wells-Barnett to W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey—were journalists as well.

Jarrett was of that lineage. And although his venue for most of the last 25 years was the mainstream media (where he earned an impressive array of awards, including five Pulitzer Prize nominations), he seldom wavered from the principles of his activist tradition. He decided to focus his energy more specifically within the black community during the final chapter of his life. Until his death at 85 (and his true age has come to light only after his death), Jarrett again was a columnist for the *Chicago Defender*.

Aside from his professional accomplishments, Jarrett founded a number of institutions that address his major concerns about the black community.

In 1975, he helped create the National Association of Black Journalists, an organization that has since become a power in the industry. In association with officials at the NAACP, Jarrett also created the Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympic (ACT-SO) program, which inspires academic achievement among black youth and generates hundreds of thousands of dollars in scholarships.

In 1993, Jarrett was selected as a professional scholar at the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University. He initiated the Vernon Jarrett Oratorical Society for Kids in 1994 as a joint effort with Chicago's DuSable Museum of African American History and local churches to help introduce black children to what he called the lost art of oratory. A few months back, he enlisted my support for a program he called "Freedom Readers," the most recent in his relentless attempt to get black youth excited about reading.

Jarrett kept up this busy schedule until he was forced to enter the hospital. He always had a hard time saying "no" or surrendering his battle station to some Young Turk. Just two years ago, for example, he assumed leadership of a faction of the National Association of Black Journalists Chicago chapter because he was discontent with its leadership.

Jarrett's chapter in the African-American story will be a large, bright one for those of us who knew him and bathed in his light. ■

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