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By John Nichols

Barney Frank Took on Banks, Bigots and Bloated Pentagon Budgets

Barney Frank came to Congress as a liberal and will leave as such-not a perfect progressive on every issue but a steady liberal who served a term as president of the Americans for Democratic Action and whose latest rating from the defenders of New Deal/Fair Deal/Great Society programs was a pure 100 percent.

That does not mean that there were not instances where Frank, a former Massachusetts legislator who arrived (to fill former the Rev. Robert Drinan's seat) in 1980 and who will leave the House at the close of his current term, was always on the right (make that the left) side of the fight. But even where he was forced to accept compromises, he did so as a man of government who argued with passion and certainty that legislators should stand up to bankers, bigots and bloated Pentagon budgets.

The Dodd-Frank financial reform legislation of 2010, which the Massachusetts congressman played such a pivotal role in crafting and passing, pulled some punches that should have been thrown at the big banks and the Wall Street speculators. But Frank would argue-with some credibility-that as the ranking Democrat on the powerful House Financial Services Committee, he had to bend at times in order to enact realistic reforms. Just as he may have to bend in order to maintain the complex coalitions that will be required to implement the legislation.

It is the challenge of defending the financial reform legislation that Frank said Monday he hopes to focus on in his last year on Capitol Hill.

"In 2010, after the bill was signed into law, I had tentatively decided to make this my last term. The end of next year will mark 40 years during which time I have held elected office and a period of 45 years since I first went to work in government full time as an aide to Mayor Kevin White in late 1967," explained Frank, who is 71 and admitted that he was not looking forward to seeking re-election in a reconfigured through still Democratic district. "But with the election of a conservative majority in the House, I decided that my commitment to the public policies for which I have fought for 45 years required me to run for one more term. I was-and am-concerned about right-wing assaults on the financial reform bill, especially since we are now in a very critical period when the bill is in the process of implementation. In addition, recognizing that there is a need for us

to do long-term deficit reduction, I was-and am-determined to do everything possible to make sure that substantial reduction in our excessive overseas military commitments forms a significant part of the savings over the next 10 years. But, my concern for these two issues today cuts very much in the opposite direction-namely, in favor of forgoing a year-long full-time election campaign and instead focusing the next year on those two issues in Congress."

So Frank will wrestle with House Republicans and disappointing Democrats over the next year. And Americans will be lucky to have him in the fight, even if they may get frustrated with some of the compromises that are required.

Where Frank will not refuse to compromise, however-indeed, where he has consistently refused to compromise-is in his advocacy for civil rights, especially, though never exclusively, the advancement of gay and lesbian rights. Long before 1987, when he came out and instantly became the most prominent openly gay member of the Congress, Frank was outspoken in his advocacy for equal protection under the law. And he was perhaps most effective because, though his reputation was that of a fighter, Frank went out of his way to put the case for LGBT rights in context-and to make that case to middle America.

Several years ago, when conservative Congressman John Hostettler, R-Indiana, accused Frank of promoting "a radical homosexual agenda," the congressman from Massachusetts countered: "I do have things I would like to see adopted on behalf of LGBT people: they include the right to marry the individual of our choice; the right to serve in the military to defend our country; and the right to a job based solely on our own qualifications."

It was Frank's long record of forthright advocacy that led National Gay and Lesbian Task Force executive director Rea Carey to respond to the congressman's decision to retire after sixteen terms in the House with a reflection that: "Barney Frank is one of kind. He has brought his own brand of brashness, boldness, unmatched wit, discipline and skill to Capitol Hill, at times ingratiating and infuriating friend and foe alike. We thank him for his years of service. As an openly gay member of Congress for nearly a quarter century, Barney Frank has made his mark on history. Yet his legacy is much more than that-for thirty years, he has dedicated himself to bettering the lives of the people he serves, and the country he serves. His voice-often loud and uncompromising-will be missed by many, including me."

Frank was such a steady and notable national presence for so many years that it is fair to say different liberals and progressives will miss different elements of the man.

But for those of us who believe that the United States cannot afford to continue to steer its largesse into wars of whim, failed weapons systems and the employment of mercenaries and free-spending "contractors" to police the world, there will be much regret at the loss of Frank's steady advocacy for deep cuts in Pentagon budgets.

Frank has long argued that an important place to begin balancing budgets is with a serious re-examination of defense spending.

And last year, he teamed with libertarian Republican Ron Paul to make the case for cuts.

This unlikely pairing (which also aligned to support legalization of marijuana) led the fight to get the federal deficit reduction commission to, in Frank's words, focus on the fact that "unless there is a substantial reduction in American military expenditures over a ten-year period close to if not slightly over a trillion dollars over what's proposed-that is at \$100 billion a year-you simply cannot deal with deficit reduction in a way that is economically and socially responsible."

Frank-working with Paul, North Carolina Republican Congressman Walter Jones and Oregon Democratic Senator Ron Wyden-put together a remarkable left-right coalition of budget and defense-policy analysts in a "Sustainable Defense Task Force" that included everyone from the Center for American Progress's Larry Korb, Peace Action's Paul Martin and the Institute for Policy Studies's Miriam Pemberton to Laura Peterson of Taxpayers for Common Sense and Christopher Preble, the director of foreign policy studies for the libertarian Cato Institute.

Based on the task force's recommendations, Frank and Paul made the rounds of the blogosphere, cable television and talk radio to propose Pentagon cutbacks. As such, they have become the most recognizable, and politically potent, proponents of a serious approach to deficit reduction.

Here is the argument that Frank and Paul made on behalf of fiscal common sense:

As members of opposing political parties, we disagree on a number of important issues. But we must not allow honest disagreement over some issues to interfere with our ability to work together when we do agree.

By far the single most important of these is our current initiative to include substantial reductions in the projected level of American military spending as part of future deficit reduction efforts. For decades, the subject of military expenditures has been glaringly absent from public debate. Yet the Pentagon budget for 2010 is \$693 billion-more than all other discretionary spending programs combined. Even subtracting the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, military spending still amounts to over 42% of total spending.

It is irrefutably clear to us that if we do not make substantial cuts in the projected levels of Pentagon spending, we will do substantial damage to our economy and dramatically reduce our quality of life. We are not talking about cutting the money needed to supply American troops in the field. Once we send our men and women into battle, even in cases where we may have opposed going to war, we have an obligation to make sure that our servicemembers have everything they need. And we are not talking about cutting essential funds for combating terrorism; we must do everything possible to prevent any recurrence of the mass murder of Americans that took place on September 11, 2001.

Immediately after World War II, with much of the world devastated and the Soviet Union becoming increasingly aggressive, America took on the responsibility of protecting virtually every country that asked for it. Sixty-five years later, we continue to play that role long after there is any justification for it, and currently American military spending makes up approximately 44% of all such expenditures worldwide. The nations of Western Europe now collectively have greater resources at their command than we do, yet they continue to depend overwhelmingly on American taxpayers to provide for their defense. According to a recent article in the New York Times, "Europeans have boasted about their social model, with its generous vacations and early retirements, its national health care systems and extensive welfare benefits, contrasting it with the comparative harshness of American capitalism. Europeans have benefited from low military spending, protected by NATO and the American nuclear umbrella."

When our democratic allies are menaced by larger, hostile powers, there is a strong argument to be made for supporting them. But the notion that American taxpayers get some benefit from extending our military might worldwide is deeply flawed. And the idea that as a superpower it is our duty to maintain stability by intervening in civil disorders virtually anywhere in the world often generates anger directed at us and may in the end do more harm than good.

We believe that the time has come for a much quicker withdrawal from Iraq than the President has proposed. We both voted against that war, but even for those who voted for it, there can be no justification for spending over \$700 billion dollars of American taxpayers' money on direct military spending in Iraq since the war began, not including the massive, estimated long-term costs of the war. We have essentially taken on a referee role in a civil war, even mediating electoral disputes. In order to create a systematic approach to reducing military spending, we have convened a Sustainable Defense Task Force consisting of experts on military expenditures that span the ideological spectrum. The task force has produced a detailed report with specific recommendations for cutting Pentagon spending by approximately \$1 trillion over a ten year period. It calls for eliminating certain Cold War weapons and scaling back our commitments overseas. Even with these changes, the United States would still be immeasurably stronger than any nation with which we might be engaged, and the plan will in fact enhance our security rather than diminish it.

We are currently working to enlist the support of other members of Congress for our initiative. Along with our colleagues Senator Ron Wyden and Congressman Walter Jones, we have addressed a letter to the President's National Committee on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, which he has convened to develop concrete recommendations for reducing the budget deficit. We will make it clear to leaders of both parties that substantial reductions in military spending must be included in any future deficit reduction package. We pledge to oppose any proposal that fails to do so.

In the short term, rebuilding our economy and creating jobs will remain our nation's top priority. But it is essential that we begin to address the issue of excessive military spending in order to ensure prosperity in the future. We may not agree on what to do with

the estimated \$1 trillion in savings, but we do agree that nothing either of us cares deeply about will be possible if we do not begin to face this issue now.

That was hardly a radical statement.

Even Defense Secretary Robert Gates has referred to Pentagon spending as "the gusher" and dismissed the notion that it is difficult to find waste, fraud and abuse in a budget that "adds up to about what the entire rest of the world combined spends on defense."

"Only in the parallel universe that is Washington, DC, would that be considered 'gutting' defense," says Gates, who has done a great service by opening the space for honest debate about defense spending.

Barney Frank-with a crucial assist from Republicans such as Ron Paul-filled that space. As Wall Street Journal columnist Gerald Seib noted, "Reps. Paul and Frank are doing more than writing a blog post.... These two odd-fellow members of Congress are harbingers of things to come. Annual defense spending has more than doubled over the last decade, largely because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But now the deficit is high, the debt is growing, and those wars are winding down, one way or another. So the parallel move to wind down Pentagon spending is coming. The only questions are how big the urge to curb will be, and what form it will take."

It is unfortunate that not just Frank but also Paul plans to retire when the current Congress completes its work. They brought a realistic approach to deficit reduction that began with an understanding that the place to begin is with necessary cuts to a bloated-beyond-belief Pentagon budget.