



Rep. Lent Had Founders' View of Congress

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By: Richard Rahn **Newsmax**

President Barack Obama has been loudly proclaiming that he is not responsible as president for the big increase in spending because it was already "baked in the cake."

He could have been more accurate by noting that under the Constitution, Congress is responsible for spending. In fact, Congress — both Democrats and Republicans — has been by nearly unanimous votes rejecting his proposed budgets, but only because they were not willing to spend as much as he was.

The big surge in spending began after the Democrats took control of Congress in the 2006 election. Members of the new Congress took office in January 2007, when the fiscal year was already a quarter complete.

The first budget the new Congress was responsible for was the 2008 budget. When Mr. Obama was a member of Congress, he voted for the big increases in spending. He also was the one who proposed a nearly trillion-dollar increase in spending as part of his "stimulus" program in early 2009 after he took office as president.

So, for the president to argue that he is not at all responsible for the big increase in spending is, to put it politely, a bit much.

The empirical evidence supports the stereotype that the Republicans are somewhat more restrained when it comes to spending than their Democratic colleagues, but that is a low standard. If the Democrats had not taken control of Congress in 2008, it is very probable that

both spending and deficits would have been lower over the past four years, primarily because the Republicans would not have voted for the trillion dollars in "stimulus" and some of the other boondoggles.

History shows that both Republicans and Democrats usually end up voting for more spending (and taxing) than they promise during their election campaigns. The basic problem is that they are heavily lobbied by those who want specific spending programs, and rewarded with campaign contributions for voting in favor of those programs.

Last week, Norman Lent, an exceptionally good and responsible Republican member of Congress from New York from 1970 to 1992, passed away. I was privileged to have Norman and his wife as close friends for several decades.

Lent, of course, was subject to all of the pressures to spend more on questionable activities but because of his strong character, was better at resisting much of it than most of his colleagues. (He usually had the most conservative voting record of all of the members from New York.)

He had a Founders' understanding of the proper role of Congress, and believed, as they did, in limited government. He would carefully read bills and try to craft them better in the committees where he served, because, unlike too many members now serving, he understood the consequences of bad or poorly crafted legislation.

Lent, although being very bright and accomplished, was always modest and kind. He really believed, in a currently unfashionable way, that his role was to be a servant of the people.

He put a very high priority on constituent service — without being a big spender. Over time, his voters rewarded him with greater and greater winning margins. By 1988, he garnered 71 percent of the vote — the all-time record for any Long Island congressman.

He was a model of how a lawmaker can be fiscally responsible, yet get re-elected time and time again in a swing district (after defeating a well-known Democrat). Lent probably could have kept his seat for life,

but he also understood there was more to life than sitting in Congress, and he left at the top of his game to take care of his family (his youngest son had developed a terminal brain tumor) and do other things.

Lent once told me that he thought the reform that would have the biggest single effect would be to no longer allow the sponsor of a bill or party leadership to name the legislation.

For example, a member might propose a bill that he names the Motherhood and Apple Pie Act of 2012. Of course, it would be hard for any member of Congress to vote against motherhood and apple pie, even though the bill might merely provide unjustified subsidies for apple growers and mothers with more than four children.

At the moment, President Obama is proposing a number of "job creation" bills, which would provide funds to hire more government workers while destroying many more private-sector jobs. It is easy to put "job creation" on a bumper sticker, while explaining destructive secondary economic effects is not.

The American republic does not need perfect political leaders, but history is clear that we need more presidents like Ronald Reagan and more members of Congress like Norman Lent if we are to avoid fiscal calamity and ensure liberty. That requires voters able to distinguish between the responsible and the charlatans.

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