House Republicans call police on Democratic congressmen

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23 July 2003

In an unprecedented attempt to suppress political opposition by force, a top Republican in the House of Representatives called on the Capitol police July 18 to oust Democrats from a room where they were caucusing. The Democrats were meeting to discuss how to deal with Republican legislation that would sharply reduce corporate payments to workers' pension funds.

Congressman Bill Thomas of California, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, summoned the police after the Democrats walked out of a committee hearing on the pension bill, protesting his decision to introduce a new 90-page version of the bill drafted by Republican staffers overnight as a substitute for legislation that was under consideration by the panel.

The legislation is both complex and controversial. It contains some provisions giving retired workers greater flexibility in managing their 401(k) accounts, allowing them to postpone withdrawals from age 70½, the deadline under current law, to age 75, and increasing the amount individuals may contribute to their individual retirement accounts (IRAs) and 401(k)s.

Its most important provision, however, affects traditional defined benefit pension plans offered by major corporations, changing the way these companies calculate how much of a current balance is required to guarantee that future pension obligations will be met. By allowing companies to assume a higher rate of return—essentially a bookkeeping fiction—the law would cut by billions of dollars a year the amount big business would have to contribute to these pension plans.

The legislation was introduced by Republican Rob Portman of Ohio and Democrat Benjamin Cardin of Maryland, and offered corporations less of a reduction in their future pension obligations than the version initially proposed by the Bush administration. Late in the evening of Thursday, July 17, Republican committee staffers substantially rewrote the Portman-Cardin bill and Thomas introduced the new bill as a substitute the next day, demanding a vote before any congressmen of either party had a chance to read it.

The Democrats objected and adjourned to a nearby library to review their options, leaving behind a single member, Pete Stark of California, to delay action by the committee by exercising his prerogative to have the bill read line-by-line.

Thomas summoned the Capitol police to eject the Democrats from their impromptu meeting room, claiming they were engaging in disorderly conduct. The policeman who responded immediately recognized the implications of this request, and called in his supervisor, who in turn contacted Donald Kellaher, assistant to the sergeant at arms. Kellaher expressed shock over Thomas's order to evict the Democrats, saying, "clearly the police in this circumstance have no role or authority to intervene." He instructed the policemen to leave, saying the dispute was "a committee matter."

Meanwhile, the rump committee hearing had itself erupted. As Thomas repeatedly asked for unanimous consent to dispense with reading the bill line-by-line, Stark continually objected and the reading continued. Stark, a longtime liberal congressman from the San Francisco Bay Area, made a sarcastic reference to Thomas's "intellect," only to be told to "shut up" by Scott McInnis, a Republican from Colorado. Stark angrily denounced McInnis, calling him several names and daring him to fight. (Stark is 71, McInnis is a 50-year-old ex-policeman).

Thomas took advantage of the interruption to gavel through another motion to suspend the reading of the bill, not allowing Stark to speak, and Stark yelled at him, "You're behaving like a fascist," and walked out, joining the other Democrats. The bill was passed unanimously through the committee with the votes of all the Republicans.

After the altercation the Democrats introduced a resolution on the floor of the House condemning Thomas for calling the police, which was defeated on a party-line vote. The Republicans tried to cover up the significance of the call for police intervention against their opponents. They claimed Thomas had called the sergeant at arms because of a threat of violence by Stark. This is a transparent lie, given that the police were summoned to the library, where the Democrats were caucusing, not to the committee room, where the alleged threat by Stark took place. McInnis echoed Thomas's account, going so far as to tell the House that he had feared a "bodily threat" from the elderly Stark.

Several leading Democrats complained that Thomas's action was without parallel in the history of the House of Representatives, and expressed a dictatorial attitude on the part of the Republican leadership, which controls the House by a narrow 225-208 majority.

Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi said, "It is clear from the debate today that the Republicans have a major problem with the democratic process." She called for an end to "the repression of our rights in this Congress." The senior Democrat on the Ways and Means Committee, Charles Rangel of New York, said, "We Democrats represent almost half the population and yet we are forced to hold sit-ins. Then, they call the cops!"

Former civil rights activist John Lewis, a Democrat from Georgia, said, "I never thought that as a member of Congress I would be threatened with arrest by sitting in the library of the Ways and Means Committee. It is unreal, it is unthinkable that a member of Congress would try to have another arrested for carrying out his or her congressional duties.... We live in a democracy, and not a police state."

A handful of Republicans objected to calling the police. Jim McCrery of Louisiana said the action was "over the top," but then praised Thomas for rescinding the order to evict the Democrats after the police refused to carry it out. Ray LaHood of Illinois was more critical, telling the *Washington Post*, "I've been here nine years and this is one of the saddest days we've had in the House. What has happened to the Democrats is shameful, it's embarrassing to our party. I'm sad for our party and I'm sad for the House."

During the floor debate over the Democratic resolution to condemn Thomas's actions, Republican leaders kept him out of sight, apparently on the instructions of House Speaker Dennis Hastert. The *Wall Street Journal*

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reported, “Embarrassed Republicans were furious with the California Republican for putting them in a position of having to fend off Democratic attacks accusing the majority of adopting strong-arm tactics. Mr. Hastert, hoping to defuse the situation, offered privately to send the pension bill back to the Ways and Means Committee and tried unsuccessfully to get the chairman to agree to an apology.”

The incident tied up the House of Representatives for most of Friday, as committees suspended meeting so their members could go to the floor of the House and vent their feelings over Thomas’s action. But the initial response in the media was to treat the conflict in a completely light-minded fashion, as though it was an occasion for cynical amusement that the majority party in the House had called the police to impose its will on the minority. Articles along these lines appeared Saturday in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and other leading daily newspapers.

This response reveals the lack of any understanding of or commitment to elementary democratic principles on the part of those—journalists, editors and commentators—who comprise the media elite in the United States.

On Monday, however, the *Post* somewhat revised its assessment of the affair, publishing an editorial entitled “House Divided” that warned: “something troubling, even dangerous, is going on here.” Citing a “poisonous atmosphere” in Congress, the newspaper pointed to the role of the House Republican leadership:

“The Republican House majority is unflinching—Democrats would say ruthless—in imposing its will on the minority. Democratic alternatives are routinely prohibited from being brought up for a separate vote, and Democratic amendments are similarly squelched—not only on the floor, but in committee deliberations as well. The time permitted for floor debate is often so condensed as to be meaningless.”

While the *Post* uses adjectives such as “disturbing” and “dangerous” to describe the atmosphere on Capitol Hill, no bourgeois commentator has attempted any serious examination of why tensions within the Congress have reached the point that almost any disagreement between the two parties could lead rival legislators to come to blows. At the most, there are references to the decline of “civility” and appeals for more bipartisanship.

There are, of course, personal motives and individual peculiarities involved in the latest incident. Thomas is perhaps the most hated man in Congress, even among his Republican co-thinkers, for his combination of arrogance, crude language and dictatorial conduct. According to a scathing profile published two years ago in the liberal journal *American Prospect*: “Thomas earned a rare hat trick in *Washingtonian* magazine’s annual ranking of the best and the worst members of Congress as determined by a poll of Hill staffers. He placed second in the category of ‘meanest,’ second in the category of ‘hottest temper,’ and ... first in the category of ‘no altar boy.’ In that category, deadpanned the magazine, it was ‘Thomas in a landslide.’”

A 12-term congressman from a safe Republican seat in the agribusiness-dominated area around Bakersfield, California, Thomas holds what is perhaps the most powerful and certainly the most lucrative committee chairmanship, with jurisdiction over tax policy, Social Security and Medicare. Consequently, he has become the favorite of the drug and insurance industries, raking in huge amounts in campaign contributions from these corporate interests, even though he has faced only token opposition to reelection.

There is a longstanding enmity between Thomas and the liberal Stark, who sought an ethics investigation into Thomas in 2001. After Eli Lilly, the pharmaceutical manufacturer, hired Thomas’s former girlfriend as its chief Washington lobbyist, at a six-figure salary, Stark charged that the job was little more than a bribe to the congressman who was to write the Bush administration’s bill adding prescription drug coverage to Medicare.

However, the intensity of partisan conflict today cannot be explained either as the product of such personal considerations, or as the result of the traditional jockeying for positions of power and influence in the federal government. Indeed, the conflicts have grown sharper even as the actual political differences between the two big business parties have narrowed to the point of becoming negligible.

Last Friday’s attempt to use the police against the Democratic Party recalls the incident only two months ago in Texas, when the Republican-controlled state government mobilized the state police to hunt for Democratic legislators who were boycotting the Texas House of Representatives. The Democrats were seeking to prevent a vote on redistricting legislation backed by the Republicans—and drafted by US House Majority Leader Tom DeLay—to shift control of as many as half a dozen congressional seats.

This episode was also treated by the media as something of a joke, even when it was revealed that DeLay’s office had contacted the federal Department of Homeland Security—the agency allegedly established by the Bush administration to combat terrorist attacks on American soil—to seek its assistance in rounding up the absent Democratic legislators.

One of the Texas Democratic congressmen whose seat would be abolished under the DeLay redistricting plan, Lloyd Doggett, a liberal from Austin, is a member of the House Ways and Means Committee and spoke during the floor debate over Thomas’s conduct. Doggett said, “It is our responsibility to stand against a police state, to stand in favor of open dialogue rather than to permit a bill to pass with only the votes of one party, and move toward a one-party state.”

There is a definite political logic in the drive for power by ultra-right and fascistic elements that control the Republican Party. The most recent clash in Congress comes after a decade of intensifying conflicts, including the first-ever impeachment of an elected president and the theft of the 2000 presidential election by the right-wing majority of the US Supreme Court.

The two years since the September 11 terrorist attacks have seen the assumption of quasi-dictatorial powers by the Justice Department—as well as the attempted assassination of the Democratic leadership of the US Senate, when letters filled with anthrax spores were sent to the offices of senators Tom Daschle and Patrick Leahy. No serious investigation has been conducted into the anthrax attacks, which are widely believed to have been carried out by right-wing elements with ties to the US military or intelligence apparatus.

Underlying the breakdown of traditional parliamentary forms is the economic polarization of American society, with social inequality assuming historically unprecedented dimensions. The social structure of the United States has changed significantly over the past three decades, with the emergence of a tiny privileged minority, perhaps one or two percent of the population, that has amassed untold wealth and income, while the living standards of the vast majority of the population have stagnated or declined. This vast socioeconomic disparity is what invests even the conflicts between the two big business parties, which represent rival factions within the privileged elite, with an enormous explosive charge.

It has proven impossible to combine adherence to democratic forms with a social structure based on control of all the resources and wealth of society by a financial oligarchy. This reality finds expression within the Republican Party, which is more and more openly determined to treat any form of political opposition as a criminal offense.

The significance of the July 21 incident, as a harbinger of future attacks on democratic rights, can only be understood within this political context.

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