

Don't read that bill

Joe Feuerherd | Mar. 2, 2009

Twenty-seven years in Washington -- as press secretary and legislative assistant to a member of the House Budget Committee, political correspondent and public relations pitchman -- has, to be sure, its drawbacks. It is easy to fall victim to the unreality of the Washington bubble, the "inside the beltway" mentality and all that.

But such experiences also provide an ear for the demagogic sound bite, the trite but false phrase, the Astroturf manufactured message masquerading as grass-roots wisdom.

Case in point: the oft-repeated cry from those who opposed the \$787 billion economic stimulus bill that no one had "read the bill."

The chorus of false outrage was large. On the House floor, Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) yelled that members of Congress had not "read the bill." Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal joined the choir in his Feb. 24 response to President Obama's address to the joint session of Congress, saying "we can rid our Capitol of corruption and ensure we never see the passage of another trillion-dollar spending bill that *Congress has not even read* [italics added] and the American people haven't even seen."

Typical of the refrain was this Feb. 14 editorial from Kansas' Lawrence Journal World: "How can they vote for a historic piece of legislation *without having read the bill?* [Italics added.] How can they look their constituents in the eye and say they are doing a good, responsible job of representing those who elected them?"

It is, admittedly, a sensible-sounding question: Shouldn't members of Congress actually read legislation before they vote? The answer, however, is of course not. It's a waste of time.

Here's the reality: The actual text of legislation does little to enlighten the reader about the content of the measure. This is as true for large spending bills as for tax-cutting measures, for social spending legislation or funds for the Pentagon. Drafted by highly specialized lawyers in the House and Senate Legislative Counsel offices, legislative language -- with its "provided that" and "amend Section X of Statute Y" -- requires interpretation. A bill's meaning and impact are obscured by the Sanskrit-like legalese necessary to amend existing statutes -- and most "new" legislation is, in fact, amendment to existing law.

The good news for those who think members of Congress should know what they are voting on is that Washington is full of such interpreters. On the stimulus bill, for example, the Congressional Budget Office, the Office of Management and Budget, the Government Accountability Office and the leadership offices of both parties in the House and Senate all provided thorough analysis of the measure. Likewise, there was a "Conference Report" -- a slightly more user-friendly interpretation of the agreement between the House and Senate conference committees than the actual legislative text. And there are more resources: committee reports, committee staff, and a representative or senator's personal staff. In addition, a truly inquisitive member of Congress could read any number of specialized publications -- the *National Journal* and *Congressional Quarterly* (and their daily reports to Congress) among them. Not least, of course, is input from the interest groups who represent those who would benefit from the spending included in the measure.

There were many conceivable, if not necessarily sincere, reasons for members of Congress to oppose the stimulus bill: too costly, too few tax cuts, not enough "shovel-ready" infrastructure funding. All fair game.

Lack of information, however, was not one of them.

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