

Kudos to Sen. Richard Lugar

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 22, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana has proven himself to be that increasingly rare breed in Washington, a Republican willing to stand up for what he believes in. He was one of the few Republicans to support the DREAM Act, repudiating a deal Republican senators struck at the beginning of the Congress to always support their leadership on procedural votes.

Yesterday, Lugar's long-term expertise in foreign affairs, and on the issues of nuclear weapons and proliferation specifically, provided sufficient intellectual justification (and political cover) for several Republicans to support the START Treaty which was happily ratified.

In the current political climate, these acts of political courage not only required Lugar to stand up to his party's leadership, it required that he risk angering the Tea Party movement which has shown its ability to knock off veteran Washington lawmakers in favor of extremist candidates in GOP primaries. (Think Delaware, Alaska and Utah.) As mentioned yesterday, the Tea Party has not spoken out much on foreign affairs, but its candidates have been strongly anti-immigrant, making Lugar's support for the DREAM Act all the more admirable.

Well, in the course of my research yesterday, I came across an item entitled "Lugar's reward" from the Washington Times dated October 3, 1986. It shows that Lugar is no novice when it comes to political courage.

At the time, Lugar joined Democrats in an effort to override President Ronald Reagan's veto of congressionally approved sanctions against the racist, apartheid, regime in South Africa. Here is an excerpt:

"Steam is building among New Right and other conservative groups to apply sanctions against Sen. Richard Lugar, the Republican leader who backed the successful effort to override the president's veto of sanctions. Mr. Lugar is chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. On Monday, a petition signed by a number of conservative organizations was presented to Sen. Jesse Helms, North Carolina Republican, urging him to assert his seniority on the foreign relations panel and go after Mr. Lugar's post."

In the event, Lugar retained his post at head of the Foreign Relations Committee and has kept his Senate seat ever since. He is standing for re-election in 2012 and I predict he will face a challenger from his right. I do not know enough about Indiana politics to know whether such a challenger would have a shot of winning a low turnout primary. And, of course, there is a side of me that hopes the GOP nominates a Christine O'Donnell-like yahoo who might hand the seat to a moderate Democrat. But, I also see Lugar's remarkable career of exercising political courage and recognize that the U.S. Senate would be the worse for his absence.

Mr. Lugar and I would probably not agree on many, many issues. He did not vote to repeal Don't Ask; Don't Tell, for example, but given his votes on other issues, I cannot but believe that his vote against repeal was based on genuine opinion, not political maneuvering. So, whatever my differences from Lugar, courage is courage and it commands respect irrespective of partisan or ideological preferences. Let's hope that the future holds more Democrats willing to question the pro-choice orthodoxy of their party and more Republicans willing to follow Lugar in doing what they think is right no matter what their leader or their Tea Party thinks.

Note to readers: This is being posted in anticipation of a god-awful early departure in the AM. Over the next week or so, postings will be less regular than usual, barring unforeseen developments.

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