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Happy Birthday and Go To Hell!

by Max Schulz

On Tuesday both houses of Congress sang their version of "Happy Birthday" to Ronald Reagan, passing a measure extending best regards on the occasion of, as he would have put it in his more lucid days, the 51st anniversary of his 39th birthday. Be it resolved, read the extraordinarily innocuous measure, "that the Congress, on behalf of the American people, extends its birthday greetings and best wishes to Ronald Reagan on his 90th birthday."

Reports correctly noted that the measure passed both houses unanimously -- without any voiced objection in the Senate, and by a recorded vote of 410-0 in the House. This hollow but gracious platitude represents the kind of measure at which Congress is particularly expert, largely because it is so meaningless. It had 224 congressional cosponsors. (It is rivaled in congressional affection by substantive legislation, whose meaning and effects are quite real upon enactment, though Congress never has any idea what they will be beforehand.)

But a closer look reveals it wasn't really unanimous after all. Turns out seven members of the House of Representatives voted "present" rather than voting in favor of the resolution. They abstained.

By consciously abstaining, they in effect actively refused to grant a kindly 90-year-old man with Alzheimer's Disease and a broken hip...mere birthday wishes. This Capitol Hill equivalent of kicking a puppy or pulling the wings off of insects is cruel, and doesn't seem to have been done for any reason other than to satisfy the nasty temperament of those who did it. It's not as if members were asked to chip in to get the Gipper a gift, after all.

So who are the notorious Birthday Seven? Who, on Dutch Reagan's 90th, couldn't even pass along the most vacuous of mealy-mouthed birthday regards? A coterie of left-wing congressmen, all Democrats, with the California delegation and the distaff side of the Congressional Black Caucus nicely represented.

They are: Oregon's Peter DeFazio, Texan Eddie Bernice Johnson, and Californians Barbara Lee, Fortney "Pete" Stark, Maxine Waters, Loretta Sanchez, and Lynn Woolsey.

Rep. Johnson is chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, of which Barbara Lee and Maxine Waters are also members. Pete Stark wanted to be a member years back, but he's

white. For that very reason, the CBC, heeding Malcolm X more than MLK, wouldn't let Rep. Stark sit at their lunch counter. (Ronald Reagan's administration, for the record, included Americans of every shade.)

Members of Congress are famous self-promoters. That's how many of them got where they are today, despite evident mediocrity in other endeavors. Rare is the day when a congressman doesn't issue a press release announcing the most inane accomplishment or pitching the lamest cause.

So it is curious that not one of the Birthday Seven sought to elaborate on his opposition to wishing former President Reagan well with a floor statement, or even a press release, explaining his vote. Is there any good reason for voting present rather than voting yes?

Pete Stark's office put out the word that, nothing against Reagan, he felt the resolution was an attempt to endorse the Gipper's economic policies. He couldn't cotton that. The other members, however, said nothing publicly about their odd votes, and their offices wouldn't respond to inquiries. It is hardly a secret that in terms of public policy none of them would be comfortable in the Reagan fold.

How hard is it to say Happy Birthday to a genial, dying man with whom you happened to disagree? Apparently pretty hard. So why not just come out and vote no on the measure? Substantively a no declaration meant just as much – or as little, depending on your view – as a vote of present. But voting present allowed each of them to issue his own personal insult to President Reagan without risking exposure for doing so. Not exactly profiles in courage material here.

In light of the last eight years, Ronald Reagan every day looms larger and larger as a political giant in American history. And with Tuesday's vote, seven petty, insignificant members of Congress affirmed on the record just what small, small people they are.

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