

PL14- "TO DIE FOR THE PEOPLE: IN A BOLD NEW PROPOSAL, THE G.O.P. URGES SENIORS TO 'BITE THE DUST FOR THE BUDGET'", SALON, 4/1/96

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A House Republican task force has developed what party leaders say is the one plan that can balance the budget and save Medicare and Social Security. The proposal, called the "Patriotic Older Americans Family Values Act," is built around a tax credit for death. It would allow seniors agreeing to a voluntary exit to bequeath a credit worth as much as \$250,000 to their children or other family members.

G.O.P. congressional leaders say encouraging seniors to sacrifice themselves for their families is the only way to restore the nation to fiscal solvency. "The projected Medicare cost-savings are illusory, and a direct assault on Social Security is politically unthinkable," a leading party strategist said. "As 77 million baby-boomers reach 65 in 2010, and entitlements and interest eat up most of the budget, simple arithmetic demonstrates that fiscal solvency is impossible unless the senior population is reduced."

The task force was mobilized by Speaker Newt Gingrich, who in the wake of his party's recent legislative setbacks concluded that Republican proposals have not been bold enough to really communicate with the American people.

"While watching 'Gandhi' the other night I suddenly had a revelation: would the Mahatma have gotten into a budget numbers game with Bill Clinton?" Gingrich said to task force members. "It's time to get back on message with a bold new proposal that can capture the public's imagination. Gentlemen, we need our own March to the Sea!"

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Many members of the task force, headed by Rep. John Kasich (R-Ohio) and made up of House Republican committee chairs, were squeamish at first, fearing that Democrats would turn the proposal to their advantage. Rep. Bill Archer (R-Tex.), for example, worried that the Democrats "would demagogue us to death" by claiming that the proposal would favor the rich over the poor, since rich families would not need the tax credit.

Speaker Gingrich's encyclopedic knowledge of history and the animal kingdom turned them around, however, as he argued eloquently that this was the most historic issue since sea-creatures crawled onto land. Noting that "thinning out the herd" has been standard practice since the time of the dinosaurs, Gingrich contrasted the Republican proposal to the "self-indulgent liberal behavior" of animals, who leave their elders to die without offering recompense to their offspring. "Our program is far more humanitarian, and it is entirely voluntary," he declared. "Frankly, the only people who could oppose it are morally corrupt liberals who believe that government knows better than people when to die."

Defending the proposal against charges it would disproportionately affect impoverished older Americans, Gingrich said, "Look, rich senior citizens pay taxes. They're not the ones derailing the balanced budget. And do we not owe them anything for having financed the Information Revolution? Frankly, future historians will record that this proposal is not only right but just."

House Majority leader Dick Armey (R-Tex.) also addressed the doubters' political concerns. "Sure, the liberal press will kill us in the short run," he stated. "But over the long run, the demographics work for us. The truth is that we do worse among seniors than any group

except blacks. And, given time to educate voters, we can murder the Democrats on this one. Just wait until Arianna (Huffington) launches her campaign to 'shame' Al Gore for not only failing to contribute to charity but supporting dependence on big government by tens of millions of people unwilling or unable to work."

Rep. Clay Shaw (R-Fla.) pointed out that many senior citizens made welfare mothers seem like models of industry. "However indolent, your average welfare mother at least does not require others to feed, clothe and even wipe her!" he declared emotionally.

Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) noted that this proposal would help restore family values and the emotional connection between the generations, which liberal government programs had done so much to destroy. "Who among us would not be moved by our parents voluntarily sacrificing themselves so we can afford to buy a house, start our own business, take that vacation of a lifetime, or send our kids to private school?" he asked.

Some doubters still held out on the grounds that this proposal would fuel what they called an irresponsible Democratic campaign to "scare seniors to death." But Rep. Kasich provided the emotional clincher, as he has so often in the budget debate, when he pledged to set an example upon passage of the bill. "Fiscal sanity requires that I serve as a role model, to show that we are serious. The madness ends here!" he said, sobbing convulsively. Holding up a picture of a child, he declared to a standing ovation: "I will die happily knowing this little guy will live in a debt-free world. Give me budget-balance or give me death!"

With the overall decision made, debate has turned to the details of the plan. Calculating that the average senior will use up some \$500,000 in health and Social Security benefits, most in the last years of life, the task-force tentatively decided on a credit of \$250,000 for voluntary death at age 65, payable to persons designated by the deceased, in a lump sum or credited against future taxes, and declining by \$10,000 each year thereafter.

In a dazzling historical overview, the Speaker described how Sun Tzu, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Vlad the Impaler, von Clausewitz, Henry Kissinger and Marvin Olasky had all stressed that it was not enough simply to have a good idea. A political strategy was needed to make it work.

"This plan's genius is not only that it relies upon free market principles, but it motivates children to get their parents to do the right thing, creating the greatest potential new constituency for Republicans since Reconstruction," he declared. "Frankly, as my reading program and the movies 'Casino' and 'Showgirls' so dramatically illustrate, real money rather than government programs is the key to motivating people in a free society. And as Dick Armey has noted, gentlemen, the future of the Republican Party lies with our youth -- not with seniors who embody liberal decay and who won't vote for us anyway!"

The Speaker also suggested that in addition to proving that Republicans were serious about saving Medicare and Social Security, the proposal would "create the greatest spur to economic growth since the invention of the sundial." He noted that if only four million people availed themselves of this opportunity it would create a giant investment pool of \$1 trillion which could "spur creation of a 'Fourth Wave' society in which death, not information, becomes the chief source of economic growth."

Gingrich argued that the proposal could create a whole new industry of entrepreneurial companies offering a comprehensive package of services -- including educating seniors about their duties to nation and family, tips on painless exit, probate and burial services, grief counseling and, above all, advice on investing the \$250,000 bonus wisely.

He also suggested special legislation to create "death enterprise zones" in the inner city. "This proposal will end once and for all the Democrats' Big Lie that we do not care about minorities," Gingrich went on. Asserting that the proposal would advance the Republican "empowerment agenda" in minority communities, he declaimed, "I see

an America in which the 'Bill Gates of Death' is a black or Hispanic American!"

Some concern was expressed about the fate of the proposal should Bob Dole become President. It was feared a 73-year old man would be reluctant to encourage his contemporaries to die, since he might identify with seniors living on Social Security and Medicare. Not a few members recalled a recent TV clip in which Senator Dole was seen repeatedly asking for mashed potatoes during lunch at what appeared to be a nursing home.

Once again, however, the Speaker convinced the doubters. "Senator Dole does not want to go down in history as the caretaker of the welfare state," he declared. "And, anyway, we'll have the votes. He's gone along on everything else. Why not this?"