

# **GOP works late to keep you in the dark**

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**Sherrod Brown**

One thing you can count on in Congress these days. They always save the good stuff for the middle of the night.

Almost every piece of controversial legislation that has passed Congress since Texas Republican Tom DeLay consolidated power has been voted on in the middle of the night.

It started a couple of years ago.

At 2:54 a.m. on Friday, March 21, 2003, the House cut veterans benefits by three votes.

At 2:39 a.m. on Friday, April 11, 2003, the House slashed education and health care by five votes.

At 1:56 a.m. on Friday, May 23, 2003, the House passed the Leave No Millionaire Behind tax cut by a handful of votes.

At 2:33 a.m. on Friday, June 27, 2003, the House passed the Medicare privatization and prescription drug bill by one vote.

At 12:57 a.m. on Friday, July 25, 2003, the House eviscerated Head Start, again by one vote.

At 12:12 a.m. on Friday, Oct. 31, 2003, the House voted billions of dollars for Iraq.

At 10:34 p.m. on Wednesday, July 7, 2004, the House rejected \$100 million in funding for first responders.

At 10:26 p.m. on Tuesday, Sept. 14, 2004, the House voted to allow U.S. government contracts to go to corporations that incorporate overseas to avoid paying their fair share of taxes.

And then, at 11:11 p.m. on Thursday, Nov. 18, 2004, the House added \$800 billion to the national debt - an increase of more than \$2,700 for every man, woman and child in America.

Always in the middle of the night. Always after reporters had filed their stories. Always after the American people had turned off the news and gone to bed.

What did the public see? At best, Americans read a small story with a brief explanation of the bill and the vote count in Sunday's papers.

But what did the public miss? They didn't see the House votes, which normally take no more than 20 minutes, drag on for as long as three hours as members of the Republican leadership trolled for enough votes to cobble together a majority.

And they are about to do it again. DeLay, the House majority leader who is indisputably the most powerful member of Congress, has promised three times to bring to the floor of the House of Representatives the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Three times - Dec. 31, 2004, Memorial Day 2005, and July 4, 2005 - the deadline passed and CAFTA was not brought up for a vote.

Why? Simple: The majority of Congress - members of both parties - would have voted it down, and DeLay does not like to lose.

The opposition to CAFTA is wide and deep: Democrats and Republicans; small manufacturers and labor unions; family farmers and environmentalists; Catholic bishops in Central America and Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Jewish leaders in the United States.

Support for CAFTA is easy to define: It was negotiated by a select few - mostly pharmaceutical companies, insurance and bank interests and the oil industry - for the benefit of the same select few.

CAFTA's opponents do not oppose foreign trade or all trade agreements. We simply insist on a trade agreement that will pass Congress by a strong bipartisan majority. We insist on a trade agreement that will draw support from religious leaders and labor leaders, from small business and small farmers - a trade agreement that will lift up workers in Guatemala and treat workers with respect in Ohio.

The United States, with our unrivaled purchasing power and our enormous economic clout, is in a unique position to help empower poor workers in developing countries while promoting prosperity at home.

When the world's poorest people can buy American products, not just make them, then we will know that our trade policies are finally working.

Brown, a Democratic congressman from Lorain County, is the author of "Myths of Free Trade."

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