

# When ignorance isn't bliss

By **David J. Sirota**

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**B**etween Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, Chris Matthews, John Ashcroft's terror warnings, "The Bachelor," the final episode of "The Sopranos" and those incessant injury lawyer commercials, voters in November are somehow expected to cast informed votes for Congress. We are supposed to base our decision on talking points parroted to us by inane TV reporters or, worse, paid political ads.

Many people, of course, simply tune out and do not vote. Those who do head to the polls often vote with little knowledge of what their elected representatives are doing.

So, in an effort to cut through the din this year, here are five congressional votes that everyone in America should know about. They come straight from the you-can't-make-this-stuff-up file, and capture how soundbite politics hide the troubling reality behind conservatives' bumper-sticker slogans.

**1. Pro-Defense:** Facing increasing violence in Iraq, military commanders in Iraq asked Congress and the president to immediately fill shortages in protective body armor. Just four months after the president signed another massive tax cut for the wealthy, up to 51,000 troops were still not properly equipped for combat, with many begging friends and family at home to buy them makeshift armor. Responding to the crisis, Senator Chris Dodd (D-Conn.) sponsored a bill to immediately plug the shortage. He was voted down (Senate vote #376, October 2, 2003), and the results have been catastrophic. As a recent study circulating in the Army notes, up to one in four casualties in Iraq was due to poor protective gear.

**2. Compassionate:** With U.S. troops struggling to secure Iraq last summer, Congress and the president repeatedly praised soldiers' efforts and promised to provide them the best facilities possible. Yet, the White House budget that year proposed to cut \$1.5 billion out of military housing. Representative David Obey (D-Wisc.) came up with a simple solution: Slightly reduce the proposed tax cuts on the 200,000 Americans making \$1 million a year to fill the budget gap for the troops and their families. Instead of getting an \$88,000 tax cut,

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millionaires would receive an ample \$83,000 tax cut, and the troops' housing would be maintained. Obey's bill was voted down (House vote #324, June 26, 2003).

**3. Tax Fairness:** In 2002, the Bush administration terminated the tax on oil and chemical industry polluters that finances Superfund toxic cleanups. As the New York Times reported, the move effectively "shifted the bulk of [cleanup] costs from industry to taxpayers," allowing the president's corporate campaign donors to pollute without having to pay for it. Just two years later, the loss of tax revenues bankrupted Superfund, leaving it unable to maintain an adequate cleanup pace. In response, Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) offered an amendment to reinstate the Superfund tax. He was voted down. (Senate vote #45, March 11, 2004), and now more and more communities are forced to wait as toxic sites fester in their midst.

**4. Patriotism:** As the recession reached new lows in December 2002, the U.S. House of Representatives considered whether to continue rewarding companies with taxpayer subsidies, even if those same companies use those subsidies to send U.S. jobs overseas. The question was simple: During a jobs and deficit crisis, should the U.S. government's Export-Import Bank continue giving most of its \$15 billion a year to subsidize a slew of Fortune 500 companies that are reducing their U.S. workforce? But when Representative Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) offered a measure to curb the government handouts to corporate job exporters, he was voted down (House vote #120, May 1, 2002).

**5. Clean Government:** Halliburton, the oil company Vice President Dick Cheney ran, continues to receive billions in no-bid government contracts for work in Iraq, even after it was cited for overcharging taxpayers and providing unsanitary facilities to U.S. troops. At the same time, Cheney is receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars in deferred compensation from the company and holds roughly 400,000 Halliburton stock options. More troubling, internal memos now show that Cheney's office was directly coordinating Halliburton contracts. When the Congressional Research Service ruled the situation represented a "potential conflict of interest," the Senate considered legislation that would have forced the termination of the Cheney-Halliburton relationship. It was voted down (Senate vote #386, October 16, 2003).

No doubt, most Americans have heard more about the president's dog and jogging schedule than where their elected representatives came down on these votes. But that merely reflects the pathetic state of American journalism, not the gravity or consequences

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of the decisions. No matter how much we tell ourselves these votes and decisions don't matter, they do. No matter how many times reporters tell us semen-stained blue dresses and gossip are more important than lies about war, peace, poverty and corruption, they're not.

The sooner we wake up and demand accountability at the polls, the better.

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