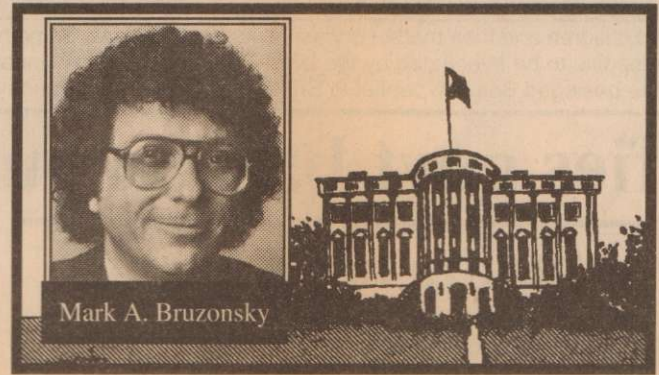


What victory!

From



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Washington

BREATHAKINGLY PART
close!

There hasn't been this kind of suspense in this capital since the Coalition War days a few years ago which brought about such high-stakes drama during the Senate debate over making war on Iraq.

Two evenings in a row, always just in time for the late TV news programmes, President Clinton emerged from the Oval Office into the White House Rose Garden smilingly proclaiming victory.

□ a dramatic triumph, the triumph, the president oozed, all the more so he suggested because it was a victory so narrowly snatched from the clutches of a Republican lock-stop attempt to orchestrate a disastrous Clinton debacle.

□ a victory made possible in the House of Representatives by a freshman Congresswoman from Pennsylvania — one who is now not likely to be reelected as a result but who, rumour has it, has been promised an ambassadorship if need be.

□ a victory made possible in the Senate by one of the president's old rivals who just a few days before was screaming at him on the phone and insisting he would vote "no!"

Just one vote in either branch of Congress and the still somewhat green president would have been battered and declared down for the count on the most important legislative effort of his presidency to date.

To get his economic plan just barely passed, in a Congress whose both Houses are dominated by his own party, this president had to personally spend his days and nights cajoling and promising, begging and pleading. It was an unseemly spectacle no other president in recent years has had to endure in such a brutally naked form.

Yet obviously taking the spiritual advice proffered in the above-quoted White House memo, President Clinton nevertheless declared a huge victory and portrayed his presidency not only as saved but as valiantly and boldly moving forward.

The underlying reality however is that the White House had to stoop so low, make so many deals, compromise so many principles, take out so many provisions of the legislation, cash in so many owed IOUs while coughing up so many future ones, that in the end the argument could just as reasonably be made that such a "victory" was more an exceeding narrow "escape" from a political drowning.

As veteran *Washington Post* columnist David Broder summed up the situation:

"The White House speechwriters may

Never forget that the energy, optimism and enthusiasm you project is vital. Even your most cynical critics will walk away impressed with your commitment. Your body language and confidence will be infectious. If you become a merchant of pain, you'll find that the middle class isn't buying — they've already had enough, thank you.... Now go forth and spread the good news.

—from a confidential White House internal memo on how to promote the president's budget plan

He had to go pleading and begging to the Democrats

—**Cookie Roberts**, *tv Commentator*

There is anarchy within the Democratic Party

—**Sam Donaldson**, *ABC news*

He had to ditch his call for a middle class tax cut and his campaign vow to fight higher gasoline taxes. The well has been poisoned here so that almost nothing gets a positive response

—**James Wooten**, *tv Commentator*

have thought they were being clever when they suggested to President Clinton that he salute the hair-breadth passage of his budget and economic plan with the line, 'The margin was close but the mandate is clear' — Truth is, they did him no favours."

"Whatever else it may be," Broder concluded, "this measure reflected no mandate — past, present or future. It is less a rallying point for congressional Democrats than a high wire over a political abyss.... The bill which Clinton strained so mightily to pass is in fact a pale pastiche of conflicting policy goals, all of them so marginally achieved that they will inevitably have to be revised."

The still new White House of President Bill Clinton seems to lack the aura of power, doesn't possess the ability to project fear of political retribution, continues to give the ongoing impression of "amateur hour".

"The Economy Stupid" had been the political theme-song of the campaign just a few months ago. But in the end the president's economic legislation satisfied very few in either Congress or the public and did

little but apply an economic touniquent to the deficit haemorrhage bleeding America's future.

In all public opinion polls voters have nearly been tied in favouring or opposing Clinton's plan, but overwhelmingly they do not believe it is sufficient in view of the promises the president had made throughout the campaign about what he would do when he got to Washington.

Maybe the only consolation for the president is that even more of the public, some 64 percent, disapprove of the way Congress does it job — a substantially higher number than those who give him a thumbs down on his own job performance!

Meanwhile, over 70 percent of the American people believe the country remains seriously economically ill, and nearly as many expressed lack of confidence that President Clinton's plan provides the requisite cures.

Indeed, only some 23 percent of the American people these days "trust" their own government to do what's right the majority of the time! Admittedly a somewhat

vague query but still a reflection of the cynicism and despair that has taken over in many quarters of US society.

In short then, regardless of the body language and infectious confidence ordered-up by the White House, this whole legislative affair has left the Clinton presidency rather high on David Broder's political tight-rope rather than comfortably savouring political victory or anticipating economic recovery.

What the Clinton administration has just been through with Congress is pretty much the economic equivalent of Bill Clinton's prior retreats on such matters as homosexuality and Haitian refugees.

In each and every case Clinton has talked a good game and continually claimed high principle.

But in each and every case Clinton has simply collapsed under the weight of countervailing power and the perceived desirability of salvaging himself with whatever he could get while still proclaiming his goals accomplished.

On the Haitians the president simply reversed course, pure and simple, even while insisting that sending them back sans hearings was the best course after all.

On homosexuality and the military the president backed away so far from his original concepts, though still claiming he was upholding them, that former campaign staff members have since been arrested in front of the White House protesting against Clinton's actions as either duplicity or ineptitude.

And on the economy, the marginal chances of the legislation just passed — after the hodgepodge of concessions, deletions, and reversals — offer very little either for serious deficit reduction or economic stimulation.

Like with so many other important issues, so far the Clinton prescription for America's serious financial mismanagement is more the equivalent of economic AZT. And yet without a real cure there is growing awareness that another decade down the road the American economic situation will be far more precarious.

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