



The Fig Leaf That Fell Off

President Obama's "pro-life" executive order couldn't save the "Stupak Democrats."

Democratic members of the House of Representatives stand by President Barack Obama as he signs an executive order on March 24, 2010 that purports to block abortion funding in his health care bill.

by Paul Kengor

On Wednesday, March 24, 2010, President Barack Obama, flanked by beaming Democratic members of Congress, with Michigan's Bart Stupak at his shoulder, signed an executive order that purported to prevent abortion funding in the "health care reform" law passed by Congress.

CNN.com described the event: "Unlike the signing of the health care bill Tuesday—which was conducted under the glare of television cameras—Wednesday's event was closed to the news media. It was attended by Rep. Bart Stupak of Michigan and 12 other House Democrats opposed to abortion rights, without whose help the landmark overhaul bill would not have passed, political observers say."

Many immediately noted that the executive order would not in fact prohibit abortion funding. The health care legislation, after all, ensured funding, and the language of the executive order couldn't change that fact (the final

bill had been stripped of the Stupak/Pitts Amendment that blocked abortion funding).

The uproar, of course, had begun long before the executive order. Popularly dubbed "Obamacare," the bill did not explicitly forbid taxpayer funding of abortion. "Make no mistake," noted Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio), a Catholic, "a 'yes' vote on the Democrats' health care bill is a vote for taxpayer-funded abortions." Another Catholic legislator, the stalwart abortion opponent Rep. Chris Smith (R-New Jersey), aptly described the bill as the greatest legislative expansion of abortion in American history. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops said the bill "must be opposed."

Catholic Democrats who supported the bill dismissed this criticism, saying that they had been sent to Washington to perform works of "social justice." The Catholic Speaker of the House, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-California), just days earlier, on March 19, had even invoked the intercession of St. Joseph on behalf of the bill (she referenced

him in connection with the "30 million American workers" that she claimed would benefit from the bill's passage). Pelosi's intercessory prayer met with the support of "The Network," a lobby of leftist nuns who publicly defied the bishops on the bill.

But sensing the need for "pro-life" cover, Catholic Democrats searched for a compromise, which led to talks that culminated in the aforementioned executive order. Every reputable pro-life organization opposed that order as a deceptive and ineffective means of preventing abortion funding in the bill. But the pro-life Democrats decided to ignore that analysis and put their faith in Obama, even though his past record in favor of abortion and abortion funding could not have been clearer.

As a state senator in Illinois, Obama repeatedly blocked legislation to provide emergency medical care to babies who survive abortion procedures; as a US senator, he had co-sponsored the Freedom of Choice Act; in his first week as president, a day after the annual March for Life in Washington,

DC, he signed an executive order that reversed the Mexico City Policy and directed taxpayer dollars to abortion providers overseas.

There are dupes, and then there are dupes. The Stupak Democrats' faith in Obama was quite a display, a study in human nature and the depths of self-delusion. Pro-lifers nationwide were aghast. One thing no one could have known at the time, however, was the ultimate political fate of the "Stupak Democrats." Alas, that verdict arrived during the mid-term elections of November 2, 2010, and it wasn't pretty for them.

Who are the "Stupak Democrats"? Most lists focus on a group of 11: Representatives Bart Stupak (Michigan), Jerry Costello (Illinois), Solomon Ortiz (Texas), Marcy Kaptur (Ohio), Kathy Dahlkemper (Pennsylvania), James Oberstar (Minnesota), Brad Ellsworth (Indiana), Charles Wilson (Ohio), Paul Kanjorski (Pennsylvania), Steve Driehaus (Ohio), and Joseph Donnelly (Indiana).

Among them, Stupak faced such an immediate backlash of hostility that he quickly announced he would not seek re-election. All the others ran for re-election, with Rep. Ellsworth running for the Indiana Senate seat, which he lost. Of the 11, only Costello, Kaptur, and Donnelly were re-elected, with Donnelly barely winning. Eight of the 11 Stupak Democrats, or 73 percent, did not survive. That's a casualty rate that dwarfs the landings at Normandy, Okinawa, and Iwo Jima.

Five additional Democrats, sometimes listed among the Stupak crew, were defeated or retired. These five had voted "yes" on the Stupak/Pitts Amendment to prevent abortion funding but also, in the end, voted for the Obamacare bill that had been stripped of the Stupak/Pitts Amendment. They, too, placed their faith in Obama and his executive order. The Susan B. Anthony List said that it targeted 20 pro-life Democratic members of Congress who voted for Obamacare. Of these 20, 15 were defeated—75 percent.

THE CASE OF KATHY DAHLKEMPER

A microcosm of what went wrong for the Stupak Democrats was the sad case of Kathy Dahlkemper, whom some had thought would be a reliably pro-life Democrat from the third district of the state of Pennsylvania, a large area in the northwestern part of

the state that includes the city of Erie. In 2008, Dahlkemper, a Roman Catholic, challenged another pro-life Catholic, Republican incumbent Phil English. In any other year, English would have won handily. The contrast during the debates between the seasoned English and the novice Dahlkemper was striking. Nonetheless, 2008 was the year for Democrats, and Dahlkemper edged out English.

In this conservative, blue-collar, traditional, pro-life, churchgoing, heavily Catholic congressional district, the worst thing that Congresswoman Dahlkemper could have done was to go to Washington and toe the party line. Yet she proceeded to do precisely that, voting "yes" on practically the entire "progressive" platform, including the \$787 billion stimulus package that Americans will be struggling to pay back for decades. Her constituents were furious.

But nothing angered them more than Dahlkemper's support of Obama's executive order in exchange for her vote on the health care reform bill. She was among the gaggle of Democrats standing beside Obama as he signed the executive order promising to protect babies from taxpayer-funded abortion. Soon after her compromise, Republicans were climbing over one another to challenge her. No fewer than six Republicans dashed to participate in the primary to see who would have the honor of opposing her in November 2010.

The man who emerged from the pile was, fittingly, a former Notre Dame football player, Mike Kelly, a local auto dealer and Roman Catholic. Kelly was not shy about highlighting Dahlkemper's political transgressions. The Congresswoman also found herself a target of the Susan B. Anthony List, a group whose mission is to find pro-life women and get them elected to Congress, whether they are Democrats or Republicans. The Susan B. Anthony List made Dahlkemper's district one of its summer tour-bus stops in districts of Democrats who had betrayed their pro-life convictions by voting for Obamacare. The group sponsored giant billboards reminding voters of Dahlkemper's vote.

Very quickly, Dahlkemper found herself trailing in the polls. This caused panic in her party, a panic which was on display in a series of mid-October articles in one of the larger papers in Dahlkemper's district, the *Sharon Her-*

ald. An October 8 article reported that attorneys for the Dahlkemper campaign were demanding that four Erie radio stations pull ads by Americans United for Life, which stated that the congresswoman's vote for Obamacare resulted in "the largest expansion of taxpayer-funded abortions ever." The lawyers for the Dahlkemper campaign said the ad was "slanderous, inaccurate, and falsified ... Dahlkemper's stance on abortion." Dahlkemper attorney Philip Friedman said, "We're hopeful that the radio stations won't air the ads and be responsible."

In a follow-up article on October 12, the *Sharon Herald* quoted Dahlkemper as protesting, "To me, it's morally reprehensible that they're using this to win an election. I assumed after I worked so hard that the pro-life camp would be with me." The article included an assessment by Dahlkemper that was stunning in its gullibility: "I think we'll look back on this bill and we'll see a reduction in abortions in this country. It's the most pro-life piece of legislation ever passed by Congress in this country."

The bill will generate a "reduction in abortions"? It's the "most pro-life piece of legislation ever passed by Congress"? Even Nancy Pelosi must have raised an eyebrow at that one. For pro-lifers, the comment was a jaw-dropper. Perhaps it was fitting that the next day, on October 13, the *Herald* ran a front-page piece headlined, "Dems giving up on Dahlkemper?" The article was based on a *New York Times* report claiming that national Democrats had "written off" Dahlkemper's chances of winning re-election. The *Times* reported that the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee was cutting funding to the Erie Democrat as part of a "triage strategy" to focus on winnable races. Dahlkemper aides contested the claim, but the story proved the final nail in her campaign's coffin.

Just three weeks later, Dahlkemper badly lost her first and only re-election bid, 56-44 percent. She, along with the other defeated Stupak Democrats, must have looked back at March 24, 2010 and winced, for it marked not only the signing of Barack Obama's executive order, but the signing of their political death warrants as well. ■

PAUL KENGOR is professor of political science at Grove City College. His books include *The Judge: William P. Clark, Ronald Reagan's Top Hand* and the newly released *Dupes: How America's Adversaries Have Manipulated Progressives for a Century*.