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## COMMENTARY

# Bloat Watch

By JEFF FLAKE

As a young kid growing up on a farm in northern Arizona, one of my more unusual chores was what I called "bloat watch." I would sit atop a hill with knife in hand, watching cattle grazing on the green alfalfa field below. As soon as the first critter assumed the bloated "I've fallen and I can't get up" position, I would rush to the victim, raise the knife and stab just behind the last rib high on the left side -- then take cover as pent-up gas and alfalfa spewed heavenward, raining down on boy and bovine. I'm sure that being stabbed in the side wasn't pleasant, but the alternative was to be unceremoniously dragged over the hill to the bone yard.



M.E. Cohen

As we debate the newest farm bill in Congress, I find myself instinctively reaching for my old knife. There are many examples of bloated government in Washington, but none are just begging for the knife as much as our farm policy.

Last week, House and Senate negotiators approved a farm bill expanding payments to farmers by nearly \$50 billion over the next decade. The bulk of this increase, more than 90%, will go to farmers producing just five crops: wheat, corn, rice, cotton and soybean. Two-thirds will go to just 10% of farmers. The passage of this bill will mark a full-scale repudiation of the Freedom to Farm Act of 1996, which sought to wean farmers off government assistance.

That the new farm bill is bad policy is not seriously disputed. It distorts the free market, wreaks havoc with incentives, further institutionalizes dependency and jeopardizes our export economy. But it is more than just bad policy -- it is bad politics for Republicans.

The farm bill's \$173.5 billion price tag over 10 years makes our claim as the party of fiscal discipline purely relative. It is estimated that this legislation will cost the average American household \$4,377 over the next 10 years -- \$1,805 in taxes and \$2,572 in inflated food prices because of price supports. That doesn't sound like a message this Republican wants to run on.

As evidenced in 1994, Republicans win elections when they draw a sharp contrast with Democrats. When Congressional Republicans seek to blur the lines, as we've done for the past several years, Democrats gain ground, as they've done for the past several years. There is an old political axiom that goes "You can never out-Democrat a Democrat." While we Republicans have tested that axiom's limits of late, we ought to understand that voters will eventually go for the genuine article. With this approach we might eke out another election with our slim majority intact, but our days are numbered.

On the other hand, if presented with an articulate "freedom" vs. "security" argument, most voters will opt for the former. The dilemma for Republicans is that we've not only abandoned the freedom argument in principle, we've dropped the rhetoric as well. Last week, at the same time Republican conferees on the farm bill were replacing the Freedom to Farm Act with the Farm Security Act, other House Republicans were holding a press conference where they slammed the Democrats for stealing the Republican Conference's "Securing America's Future" theme. Frankly, I'd rather be accused of stealing that patronizing theme than coining it. Let the Democrats have it.

In a 1964 speech, Ronald Reagan reminded us that there is no such thing as "left" or "right." Rather, there was only an "up" toward freedom or a "down" toward totalitarianism. "Those who would sacrifice freedom for security," Mr. Reagan said, "have already started down the downward path."

It is probably too late for Congress to reverse course on this farm bill. We can only hope that President Bush is watching, pen in hand, as Congressional Republicans abandon all discretion and graze on green alfalfa right along with the Democrats. Being stabbed with a veto pen might not seem pleasant, but it sure beats ending up in the political bone yard.

***Mr. Flake is a Republican Congressman from Arizona.***

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