

Congress Has Removed a Ban on Funding Neo-Nazis From Its Year-End Spending Bill

Under pressure from the Pentagon, Congress has stripped the spending bill of an amendment that prevented funds from falling into the hands of Ukrainian neo-fascist groups.

By James Carden

JANUARY 14, 2016

In mid-December 2015, Congress passed a 2,000-plus-page omnibus spending bill for fiscal year 2016. Both parties were quick to declare victory after the passage of the \$1.8 trillion package. White House spokesman Josh Earnest told reporters “we feel good about the outcome, primarily because we got a compromise budget agreement that fought off a wide variety of ideological riders.” The office of House Speaker Paul J. Ryan touted the bill’s “64 billion for overseas contingency operations” for, among other things, assisting “European countries facing Russian aggression.”

It would be safe to assume that one of the European countries which would stand to benefit from the omnibus measure—designed, in part, to combat “Russian aggression”—would be Ukraine, which has already, according to the White House, received \$2 billion in loan guarantees and nearly \$760 million in “security, programmatic, and technical assistance” since February 2014.

Yet some have expressed concern that some of this aid has made its way into the hands of neo-Nazi groups, such as the Azov Battalion. Last summer the Daily Beast published an interview by the journalists Will Cathcart and Joseph Epstein in which a member of the Azov battalion spoke about “his battalion’s experience with U.S. trainers and U.S. volunteers quite fondly, even mentioning U.S. volunteers engineers and medics that are still currently assisting them.”

And so, in July of last year, Congressmen John Conyers of Michigan and Ted Yoho of Florida drew up an amendment to the House Defense Appropriations bill (HR 2685) that “limits arms, training, and other assistance to the neo-Nazi Ukrainian militia, the Azov Battalion.” It passed by a unanimous vote in the House.

And yet by the time November came around and the conference debate over the year-end appropriations bill was underway, the Conyers-Yoho measure appeared to be in jeopardy. And indeed it was. An official familiar with the debate told *The Nation* that the House Defense Appropriations Committee came under pressure from the Pentagon to remove the Conyers-Yoho amendment from the text of the bill.

The Pentagon's objection to the Conyers-Yoho amendment rests on the claim that it is redundant because similar legislation—known as the Leahy law—already exists that would prevent the funding of Azov. This, as it turns out, is untrue. The Leahy law covers only those groups for which the “Secretary of State has credible information that such unit has committed a gross violation of human rights.” Yet the State Department has never claimed to have such information about Azov, so funding to the group cannot be blocked by the Leahy law. The congressional source I spoke to pointed out that “even if Azov is already covered by Leahy, then no there was no need to strip it out of final bill.” Indeed, the Leahy law cannot block funding to groups, no matter how noxious their ideology, in the absence of “credible information” that they have committed human rights violations. The Conyers-Yoho amendment was designed to remedy that shortcoming.

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Considering the fact that the US Army has been training Ukrainian armed forces and national guard troops, the Conyers-Yoho amendment made a great deal of sense; blocking the avowedly neo-Nazi Azov battalion from receiving US assistance would further what President Obama often refers to as “our interests and values.”

That neo-Nazis (or neo-fascists, if you prefer) are a distinctly minority taste in Western Ukraine, is clear and is not in dispute. Of late, however, there have been troubling signs that they may become a force to be reckoned with. According to *The Jerusalem Post*, in Ukrainian municipal elections held last October, the neo-Nazi Svoboda party won 10 percent of the vote in Kiev and placed second in Lviv. The Svoboda party's candidate actually won the mayoral election in the city of Konotop. Meanwhile, Radio Free

Europe/Radio Liberty reported in November that Azov operates a boot camp that exposes children to “the regiment’s far right-wing ideology.”

Whether White House spokesman Josh Earnest was referring, in part, to the Conyers-Yoho amendment as one of those “ideological riders” the administration fought to defeat is unclear. What is clear is that by stripping out the anti-neo-Nazi provision, Congress and the administration have paved the way for US funding to end up in the hands of the most noxious elements circulating within Ukraine today. ●

0 COMMENTS

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ELECTION 2016 DONALD TRUMP NEW YORK CITY

Trump Gets a Debate Bounce From New Yorkers' 9/11 Courage, but He Ignored First Responders When They Needed Him

“When the health of 9/11 first responders was on the line, Trump was silent.”

By Leslie Savan

JANUARY 15, 2016

Donald Trump's seemingly impassioned defense of New Yorkers' courage in the face of 9/11 at the GOP debate last night has made the media swoon, and possibly nailed him the nomination.

“That was heart,” Mika Brzezinski said on *Morning Joe* this morning. It “Proves Donald Trump Is Human,” a video on MSN hailed. Even conservative Trump foe Charles Krauthammer declared, “That was the moment of the debate. That was a moment where Trump clearly had won.”

But that win is based on one of Trump's grander fake-outs. What Trump didn't say, and what most media haven't mentioned, is that his emotional attachment to New Yorkers' bravery has never extended to guaranteeing healthcare for the first responders to the tragedy, the one he so successfully made his own last night. (big h/t to Michael McAuliff)

Trump's 9/11 spiel came, of course, after Ted Cruz attacked him for his "New York values." Cruz was winking at South Carolina and Iowa voters because *they* know what those values are—New Yorkers will take your guns, turn you gay, hand out free abortions, and Jesus knows what else.

Wow, I thought at first, Cruz is out-demagoguing the champ. But then Trump came right back at him, and with a lot more than a noun, a verb, and 9/11:

New York is a great place. It's got great people, it's got loving people, wonderful people. When the World Trade Center came down, I saw something that no place on earth could have handled more beautifully, more humanely than New York. You had two one hundred...

(APPLAUSE)

...you had two 110-story buildings come crashing down. I saw them come down. Thousands of people killed, and the cleanup started the next day, and it was the most horrific cleanup, probably in the history of doing this, and in construction. I was down there, and I've never seen anything like it.

And the people in New York fought and fought and fought, and we saw more death, and even the smell of death—nobody understood it. And it was with us for months, the smell, the air.

Cruz looked mortified, and Trump's prospects look better than ever. Standing up for New York could easily gain him more Democratic votes, maybe even win him the deep-blue state.

But here's the thing: When it came to actually *doing* something for the people who fought and fought amid the smell of death, Donald Trump has done nothing. Maybe worse than nothing—he's ignored them.

With the 2016 campaign in full swing, 9/11 first responders were desperately trying to get Congress to extend the health benefits they had won in a 2010 bill. Without Congress reauthorizing the program, doctors couldn't plan on the continuity of care for some 33,000 ailing responders, many with cancers caused by the toxins at Ground Zero. Many had already died. Citizens for the Extension of

the James Zadroga Act, a coalition of 9/11 first responders, survivors, advocates, and unions, sent letters to all the presidential candidates, asking them to urge Congress to pass the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act. This is the effort that Jon Stewart fought so hard to pass.

The three Democratic candidates answered “yes,” that they’d support the bill, but the only top-tier Republican candidate to say yea was Marco Rubio. Donald Trump didn’t even bother to respond to the letter, or to a second letter, much less support the bill on his own.

“As a lifelong New Yorker, I fully expected Donald Trump to respond back,” Richard Alles of the Uniform Fire Officers Association told me. “I was shocked when he didn’t.

“Now he’s talking about the heroism and how great New Yorkers are, and he wants to be leader of our nation—but he can’t even answer a simple yes-or-no question? Everything he was saying last night was a farce, they were meaningless words.”

Alles, one of the first responders who lobbied for the bill with Stewart in Washington, adds, “Trump is even more accountable than the others, because he’s a New Yorker.”

A former Hill staffer who worked on the bill was also taken aback at Trump’s I-love-New York performance last night. “Trump had an opportunity to lead when it mattered and he never did,” he says. “We were fighting this fight since April, when the bill was introduced, through December. He never uttered a word. When the health of 9/11 first responders was on the line, Trump was silent.”

And moneywise? According to the Smoking Gun, the multibillionaire “did not make a single charitable donation to any of the not-for-profit groups that provided aid to survivors, rescue workers, or the families of cops and firemen who died trying to save others, Internal Revenue Service records show.”

After the 9/11 coalition got little GOP response from the first letter, “we sent a second one, and spoke with a couple people in the Trump campaign,” Alles said. “We took out a full-page ad in the Milwaukee paper before the first Fox Business debate [in November], as a prompt to the moderators to ask the question.” But they didn’t then, and moderators Maria Bartiromo and Neil Cavuto didn’t last night. “These are savvy media people who know what everyone’s doing. Maybe there are time constraints. But speaking as a 9/11 first responder, we all of us take exception when politicians try to use that day to wrap themselves in the flag.”

Not all New York media were impressed by Trump’s salute to New Yorkers. Brian Lehrer, host of a popular WNYC radio show, said today that Trump sort of reduced “New York values” to resilience, while ignoring all the other New York values—like being pro-choice, supporting Black Lives Matters, and other liberal issues that dare not be praised on a GOP debate stage.

In December, the Zadroga Act finally did pass, but only after the 9/11 coalition and Jon Stewart embarrassed enough Republicans to allow it into the omnibus spending bill.

One of Stewart’s embarrassment tactics may have especially helped. He had already visited Trevor Noah’s *Daily Show* with several of the surviving first responders, but it didn’t seem to pierce through all the campaign noise, mostly by and about Trump. So two days later,

Stewart went on the Colbert show and donned a Donald wig to “channel” Trump. He explained that the only way anyone would pay attention to the Zadroga bill would be if Donald Trump talked about it.

When the fake Trump exhorted Congress to pass the bill, it did indeed get more attention. But the real Trump never said a thing.

Watch the fake one here:

Jon Stewart Crashes Stephen’s Monologue



Editor’s Note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that Marco Rubio and Lindsey Graham were the only Republican candidates to support the Zadroga bill. In fact, Mike Huckabee and George Pataki also did. First responder Richard Alles did not appear on the Daily Show, as earlier stated, though he did lobby extensively with Jon Stewart in Washington. ●

0 COMMENTS

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