

Dave Obey

Rochester, April 24, 1975

Dave came to talk to my classes--after a debate on Viet Nam humanitarian and evacuation aid that ended at 3 A. M. this morning! I'll only mention a few things he said about his constituency relations--most of his talks were about reform.

I asked him to talk about how he got interested in politics in the first place. Said he was in parochial school in 7th grade and the nun teaching the class suggested he take the pro-Joe McCarthy position in a class debate. At the time he was skipping school and not interested in anything much--knew Dewey, FDR and HST and that's all. Got interested, so much so that "I peddled more literature for Bob Taft in 1948 than anyone in Wisconsin." Later was attracted by Stevenson. "I always said McCarthy made me a Republican, Stevenson made me an independent and Eisenhower made me a Democrat." By time he was at University of Wisconsin, he decided he was a Democrat and actively organized there. Was in graduate school when state legislature chance came up. He went to his county chairman and found that county chairman wanted to run for Congress. He suggested Dave run--it was a Republican district with an aged incumbent. He won and has been at it ever since.

Viet Nam and the debate he left was on his mind all day. He voted for aid to Viet Nam and against many of the liberals. Said the debate was the "most emotional" he had ever seen in Congress--even "racist" where helping the refugees is concerned. He believes we owe the Vietnamese some help after what we did to them, but that many liberals are adamant against

sending aid or letting President use troops to help evacuate Americans. "It all depends whether you believe Ford and Kissinger when they say it's all over. I believe them." Said he followed Don Fraser often on foreign policy because Fraser thinks things through. And they were together on this one.

Said he anticipated trouble from the vote back home. "My district convention will be held this weekend, and I'll get some trouble from my liberal friends. I called Frank Nicolay, Chairman of the convention and told him I wanted him to know why I voted the way I did. I told him I didn't expect him to speak for me. He said 'I'll say Dave has his reasons. But that's all I'll say.' It will be a messy day." Said he'd just take it and that it wouldn't be fatal. He seemed to think the liberals would give him the most flak, but he said that "I have a hawkish constituency."

When I asked him about political debts and how long you owed people in politics, he answered in terms of his primary constituency. "When I look around to see who I owe my career to, to see those people that were with me in 1969 when I really needed them and when most people thought I couldn't win--these are the people I think I owe. Not long ago, I got a letter from the head of the American Legion in my state noting that I hadn't been to their cocktail party in Washington for the last two years. I don't go to any of those Washington parties. It's the only time I have a chance to see my family--from 7:30 to 9:30 at night. So I wrote him telling him that if he was annoyed, he should talk to my wife and children. I even turned it into a newsletter, telling my constituents that I didn't think I owed it to them to go to such things. But I make two exceptions--

groups in which I have personal friends and groups that were with me in 1969. Take the Machinists for example. They were a great help to me when I needed help. I always go to their gatherings. That gives them a live congressman for their members to beat on so they will feel better afterwards. But that's not owing--it's loyalty.

One theme of the day was his fear of one issue groups who only want one thing and are not tolerant of others or of politics (which is negotiation and compromise). He blasted in this regard, Common Cause, Jewish groups, civil servants, construction workers. "It disgusts me to spend an hour with a group talking about one issue as if the fate of the world depended upon it. It drives me up a wall. You try to broaden their interest and get them to talk about something else, but it doesn't work. You can't get away from their one issue." He is a balancer and, in that sense, responsible.

He said that his case work had doubled since he got the Okonski part of the district in 1972. He has jumped his district staff from 2 1/2 to 4 between 1969 and now. He spoke of "the myth of Okonski." "We give them a hell of a lot better service with our rotating office hours, once a month in every county. But I don't have the reputation for service that he had. I'm not the myth he was."

He spoke about feeling the cynicism of people when he talked to schools and that it was very discouraging. He felt the only way to combat it was to disagree with them whenever he had the chance--to go "cross grain" and hope to gain "credibility" that way. "Harry Truman said that if you say what you think is right, you'll please half and astonish the other half."

Spoke of his district often as "rural," "a rural district" in several contexts. One involved the farmers and the prices they were getting. "Ten farms close every week in my district." He thinks the middle man is getting too much and he strongly advocated anti trust action to increase competition. A strong strain of anti-bigness and populism here in his faith in anti-trust action. A second instance was when he vented displeasure at urban congressmen who voted vs. the dairy provision in the agriculture bill that he wanted. He said he had voted for things urban congressmen wanted that were not popular in his district re. mass transit and on minimum wage, and said he wasn't going to do it anymore unless they helped rural areas with their problems. He thinks his district will lost most of its farming in time.

He said he'd vote for hand gun control but not long guns--but said hand gun vote would be unpopular. "It will be hard to sell, but I think I can do it." Again, his willingness to take stands that require explaining.

He, again, spoke of Marathon, Portage and Wood as his core counties. Said he did poorer this year in Marathon than any other county and blamed it on lack of turnout, because he sent his organizers over to help Baldus in next district. (Would Horton do that for Conable?)

He said he hoped we wouldn't learn the lesson from Viet Nam that we shouldn't use troops anywhere--need ability to discriminate.

Thinks most congressmen are too timid and think people are dumb. He does not and thinks they can accept explanations. "We underestimate the public's ability to understand."

Says he's only been asked by leadership to change vote twice in six years and that he finds that "^{appalling}appealing." It indicates leaders are not doing their job. Says he was leaning on people all the time ^{as} or whip in the Wisconsin legislature.

Is skeptical re new budget system--calls it "Rube Goldberg." Sees Dick Bolling as key caucus figure.