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Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982): News Article 38

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Clayton Fritchey

The Quiet Success of Claiborne Pell

Mary Lasker, the New York philanthropist who has done so much to promote government support of medical research, was once asked her secret of success. She gave the credit to her late husband. "Mary," he said, "you can move mountains if you are willing to do two things: (1) Do all the work; (2) see that others get all the credit."

I recalled this the other day when the Senate, by a large majority, quietly passed an important bill which could one day head off "environmental warfare." One reason this constructive legislation went through so smoothly is that it was sponsored by a self-effacing senator who gets a lot done by practicing the Lasker formula of tenacious effort and personal anonymity.

I doubt if more than a handful of people know that the bill's author was Claiborne Pell, the courtly, personable Democratic senator from Rhode Island. But then it is also unlikely that the general public knows that he has introduced and patiently nursed to passage in recent years a half-dozen other measures of note.

In Congress, the flamboyant and spectacular hares usually monopolize the spotlight, but the Pell record is a good example of how the tortoises in the long run often rack up more solid legislative achievements—such as the environmental warfare resolution.

When Pell became interested in the problem several years ago, it sounded so farfetched that nobody wanted to listen. Above all, the Pentagon did not want Congress or anybody else interfering with its highly secret experiments with meteorological and environmental changes as war weapons.

Even now, the extent of these experiments is not known. Pell says the potential military use of environmental modification ranges "from simple rainmaking to possible earthquake stimulation, steering of ocean currents or tidal wave stimulation." Even experiments with artificial hurricanes and altering the earth's temperature have been reported.

Pell says he would be very much surprised if some of the other big pow-

ers have not taken steps to develop their own military capability along similar lines. This is what led him to propose in the last Congress an international treaty prohibiting the use of any environmental or geophysical modification as a weapon of war.

It got nowhere, but Pell quietly began educating his colleagues, and this year, with the co-sponsorship of 18 other senators, a new resolution was launched, calling on the United States to take the lead in seeking an international agreement to outlaw such warfare practices. It has just passed the Senate by a vote of 82 to 10.

It often takes much longer than two Congresses to get action on problems which, however important, have not seized the public's interest. More than five years ago, Pell began promoting a treaty for international control of the oceans and banning the placement of weapons of mass destruction on the ocean floor. Today, such a treaty is in effect, already signed by 87 nations.

It took seven years, though, for Pell

to win acceptance of a higher education bill, which has finally established the concept that education beyond high school is a right that should belong to all Americans. It has taken endless patience to get this on the books, but now it is done, again with little credit for those who stuck with it through thick and thin.

It has taken the better part of a decade to get Congress to ban hostilities in Indochina and to reassert its own warmaking powers.

There have been many antiwar leaders more articulate than Pell, but few more quietly consistent. One colleague recalls a White House briefing of a group of senators on Vietnam back in 1966, at the conclusion of which former President Lyndon Johnson looked around and wanted to know if anybody wanted to argue. When nobody spoke up, Pell politely said, "Mr. President, I would not want you to think that my silence means acquiescence." And it didn't.



Sen. Claiborne Pell