

What can horses teach us about our government?

You may have wondered about the recent news articles on horse slaughter nestled in between stories of indictments, scandals, war and natural disasters. Even a horse lover might wonder if the battle to stop horse slaughter merits national attention in such tumultuous times. Yet there is a story within the horse slaughter story that lays bare just how dysfunctional our “representative democracy” has become.

If ever there should have been an easy law to pass, it should have been one to ban horse slaughter. The business has negligible economic impact on Americans. It is foreign owned, pays few taxes, provides only a few dangerous and low paying jobs, and is generally unwelcome in the very communities where it exists.

Paula Bacon, the mayor of Kaufman, Texas spoke to the Senate on behalf of a ban because she has been unable to rid her town of the foul smelling, unsanitary Dallas Crown horse slaughter plant. The plant has been in continuous violation of sewer and other ordinances and refuses to pay its fines, opting instead to hire lawyers to block the town at every turn.

The horse slaughter industry’s only allies are the meat producers (fearing a slippery slope), their veterinarians, and a few organizations with vested interests. The racing industry, hundreds of horse organizations, every humane group, tens of thousands of horse owners and over 70% of Americans favor banning horse slaughter.

Legislation to end horse slaughter had been building support in both houses for years but had been blocked by Representative Bob Goodlatte, Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. In 2004 HR-857 had 228 House cosponsors, but Goodlatte refused to let it out for a vote. In a town hall meeting in Lexington Virginia that June, a frustrated and angry crowd tried to call him to task.

Goodlatte offered up the usual litany of reasons he believed that slaughter was good for horses, but the crowd had heard it all before and didn’t believe a word. A veterinarian asked what they would have to do to get a ban on horse slaughter. Goodlatte replied “You will have to convince *me* and you have not done so.” Another person asked “What kind of democracy do we have if you can ignore the will of the overwhelming majority of your constituents?” Goodlatte snapped “This is not a democracy, it is a republic.” He proved himself right, and HR-857 died with the congressional session, never having seen a vote even within his committee. Years of grass roots efforts by hundreds of organizations and thousands of horse enthusiasts had been thwarted by one man. There was worse to come.

On Thanksgiving week of 2004, the wild mustangs were dealt a sudden and deadly blow when Senator Conrad Burns of Montana slipped language into the last minute omnibus spending bill that directed the BLM to begin selling mustangs at auction. The language was never discussed in either chamber and became law in a matter of days. Congress never meets its own deadlines for such bills, undoubtedly *because* the last minute crush gives ample opportunities for pork and mischief.

Decades earlier it had taken years for “Wild Horse Annie” and tens of thousands of school kids to secure legislation to protect the mustangs. The law had passed both houses by unanimous votes in 1971, and it was wiped out in 2004 by one man without discussion.

Soon mustangs began showing up in feedlots and slaughter houses. When forty-one mustangs were slaughtered by the Illinois Cavel plant, the backlash finally brought the horse slaughter issue to wide public attention.

Asked if he wasn't ashamed of such an underhanded tactic, Senator Burns replied he was proud of what he had done. He used the excuse that the 32,000 wild horses were over grazing public land, but within weeks the Interior Department was working to get the number of private cattle allowed on public lands increased above its then current level of about 4.5 million! When BLM scientists Bill Brooks and Eric Campbell issued scientific studies concluding that such an increase would be dangerous to the water and forage resources, their conclusions were summarily rewritten stating that it would be neutral to beneficial!

This year a temporary ban on horse slaughter was finally slipped around Goodlatte by adding an amendment to his own Agriculture Budget that pulled funding for inspectors at the slaughter plants. Our “representative democracy” seemed at last to be working when the amendments passed both houses by bipartisan margins mirroring their overwhelming public support. But alas, the appearance of a functional government was shown once again to be an illusion.

The House and Senate bills with their anti-slaughter amendments were sent to the conference committee. The committee is supposed to arbitrate differences between the House and Senate versions, but since the language of the two amendments was identical, it *should* have been left unchanged.

Just before the committee was to convene, it was leaked that Chairman Henry Bonilla of Texas had plans to throw out the amendment wholesale. Internet groups, horse associations, and animal welfare organizations, immediately began a fax, email, phone, and media blitz to expose the treachery. Before the committee could react the press was all over the story.

Bonilla retreated to a compromise 120 day delay leaving the ban effective for only a single eight-month period instead of a year. Changes in other parts of the bill made even its sponsors wonder if it would indeed stop horse slaughter. Only after the USDA's Office of General Council sent out a letter saying the additional language had no effect on the horse slaughter provision, did the furor abate. Had it not been for the overwhelming reaction of the anti-horse slaughter movement the horses would have once again been ambushed by one person.

The system has become so bad that even the abusers are complaining. American farmers got “COOL” passed in the 2002 Agriculture bill, mandating labeling of the country of origin for produce and most meats. The bill has been repeatedly delayed by exactly the same tactics used against the horse slaughter amendment. This year, COOL funding was once again delayed.

One angry senator said “I'm furious. Congress passed a law and this President signed it in 2002. Now there are a few hand-wringers in Congress who are bowing to special interests and using backhanded maneuvers to block mandatory COOL. The members who inserted this delay should be ashamed of themselves.”

Who was this irate Senator? He was none other than Conrad Burns, the man who had been so proud of using a similar tactic against the mustangs. And who did this “backhanded maneuver”? It was of course Henry Bonilla. And who was Bonilla’s constant confederate in the effort to thwart COOL? Yes, you guessed it, Bob Goodlatte!

There is a final irony. When Bob Goodlatte first ran for office he warned that if his opponent was elected he would become a career politician. Goodlatte went on to promise he would voluntarily limit himself to six terms because he believed that anyone who stayed longer inevitably became corrupted by the system. Last fall Goodlatte was elected to his seventh term.

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