

The people killed amnesty

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The justifiably furious reaction of the American public, which deluged senators with telephone calls, e-mails and faxes, forced the Senate to reverse itself yesterday and send the amnesty bill crashing to defeat — a potentially fatal blow. It was a devastating setback for the Bush administration and its Democratic Party allies, in particular Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Sen. Ted Kennedy.

In addition to being an extraordinary substantive triumph for the American people, it was a huge victory for the conservative movement. Talkers such as Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Mark Levin, Laura Ingraham and many others played an indispensable role in making available the research by the Heritage Foundation and NumbersUSA and analysis from editorial pages such as this one to tens of millions of Americans in a very short period of time. But ironically, by demonstrating in a powerful way its ability to reach and educate the public about the specific problems with the bill, talk radio has also made liberal politicians like Sen. Dianne Feinstein even more determined to revive the so-called Fairness Doctrine (the equal-time policy enforced by the Federal Communications Commission until it was eliminated in 1987 at the urging of President Reagan) in an effort to take away the one part of the mass media that conservatives dominate. On the final vote, virtually the entire conservative movement lined up against the bill. On the losing side were the leading Democratic presidential contenders — Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama — and the Bush administration, vividly demonstrating the political gap between the president and the conservative movement.

On Tuesday — just 48 hours before the legislative coalition supporting the bill crumbled — the bill appeared to have been given a new lease on life. Despite the abysmal poll ratings of the president and Congress, and the fact that barely one-quarter of the American public favored the bill, 64 senators (four more than needed) voted for cloture. This permitted Mr. Reid with White House support to bring the bill to the floor, together with a carefully selected group of amendments that amnesty advocates believed either 1) were unlikely to pass; or 2) if passed would not change the pro-amnesty thrust of the bill in a significant way; and 3) if necessary, could be stripped out of the legislation in conference.

Yet just 48 hours later, the amnesty coalition collapsed, and the 64 Senate supporters became just 46. What happened? As we noted above, talk radio proved that in modern times, it is indispensable for conservative political success. Much of the credit should also go to the bipartisan lobbying organization NumbersUSA, a powerful advocate for strengthening border security, which made it clear to members of Congress that they weren't buying the phony games some lawmakers wanted to play: proposing tough-sounding amendments that stood little chance of becoming law, while voting for cloture — and in effect for amnesty. The 18 senators who switched from supporting amnesty on

Tuesday to opposing it yesterday are Democrats Jeff Bingaman, Sherrod Brown, Tom Harkin, Ben Nelson, Mark Pryor and Jim Webb; and Republicans Kit Bond, Sam Brownback, Richard Burr, Norm Coleman, Susan Collins, Pete Domenici, John Ensign, Mitch McConnell, Lisa Murkowski, Ted Stevens, George Voinovich and John Warner