

OEO Backers Fought Alone

By Eve Edstrom

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Of all the strategy meetings that took place during the week that the Office of Economic Opportunity won the battle for its life in the House, one unpublicized session is fast becoming the talk of the town.

It was set up by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and took place on Capitol Hill. As 11th-hour assignments to gain Congressional support for OEO were about to be made, an extraordinary precautionary move was taken.

The representative from OEO was asked to leave the room.

"We couldn't take any chances," one civil rights legislative technician said. "We just couldn't be sure OEO was walking down the same side of the street with us."

Despite statements by OEO Director Donald Rumsfeld that the Nixon administration stood behind its bill to keep OEO intact, there were numerous reasons why OEO's chief supporters distrusted the administration.

At a news conference Dec. 8, President Nixon had expressed hope that an "accommodation" could be reached on the OEO legislation.

To many OEO supporters, this meant that some version of a substitute bill giving control of most OEO programs to the states would be acceptable to the administration.

Efforts by the Nation's mayors and Urban Coalition Action Council members to get Mr. Nixon to make a strong statement against the substitute bill failed.

And labor and civil rights legislative technicians were frustrated by OEO's failure to even come up with a head count of Republicans who could be relied on to vote against the substitute.

"The only thing that makes sense is to share information," the AFL-CIO's Kenneth Young said. "But we got next to nothing from OEO."

"This is just the opposite of what happened in the last few days when we worked closely with the Department of Health, Education and Welfare against the

Whitten amendment to curtail Federal school desegregation powers."

The Urban Coalition Action Council's Lowell R. Beck found it highly unusual that there was no overall administration strategy to guide those who were fighting for OEO.

'Not the Main Cog'

"I've been around here for 10 years and you usually work to supplement and support administration efforts," he said. "You're not the main cog in developing strategy to pass administration legislation."

But those working for OEO's survival found they not only were the "main cog" in mapping out strategy but that some of their efforts were being scuttled by OEO representatives.

While the coalition of OEO supporters was working to kill the state-control substitute, OEO was consulting with House members on amendments to make the substitute more palatable.

"We were violently opposed to perfecting the substitute and history proved

us right," civil rights leader Joseph L. Rauh Jr. said. "The administration was ready to settle for much less."

Therefore, the OEO representatives was asked to leave the Leadership Conference meeting on Dec. 10, because supporters of OEO felt it unwise to share their strategy with the agency.

'In The Dark'

"They let us work in the dark," one civic leader said. "I get sick every time I read how the administration pulled off a great legislative coup."

"A lot of blood, sweat and tears went into this battle, but it would have been as easy as pie if we had received White House support."

No one discounts the fact that Rumsfeld was highly successful in preventing some of his former colleagues in the House from handing most of the poverty programs over to the states when the crucial vote came on Dec. 12.

But numerous other factors were involved. Not to be underestimated is the fact that 38 members who had voted to scrap a strong voting rights law the previous night switched to oppose state control of the poverty programs.

"They just didn't want to fire two bullets in a row at the poor," one observed said. "It's entirely possible that we could have won the voting rights fight and lost the poverty one if the legislation had been taken up in reverse."

Of equal importance was the intensive lobbying effort that the Nation's mayors conducted against taking poverty programs away from local officials.

Their effort was similar to that mounted by the American Bar Association when it was responsible for knocking out a Senate-passed amendment to give governors control of legal programs for the poor.

And in all the hubbub over the poverty bill, scant attention was paid to the role that the governors did not play.

With few exceptions, the governors did not embrace the idea of being saddled with OEO. As one reportedly said:

"Hell, who wants to have the Statehouse blamed for OEO's problems. It's much easier to blast Washington."