

On the crime bill, the Stupid Party comes through again

Even before the House of Representatives two weeks ago crumpled the crime bill into a small spitwad and pitched it in President Clinton's face, the Republican leadership was doing all it could to make sure some kind of crime bill passed. This week it did pass, and Mr. Clinton once again walks away with a major victory.

And once again, the Stupid Party has helped him do it by letting him define the issue. It's not just the 46 Republicans who defected from the ranks Sunday evening to vote for the bill, but the leadership of the party itself.

In a letter to Mr. Clinton earlier this month, five GOP House leaders wrote, "Contrary to the assertions of some in your administration, the crime conference report is not stalled because of the assault weapons provision, but instead due

to the more than \$9 billion in new social welfare spending. We are writing to offer our assistance in moving a *real* crime bill that will get more police on the street and more violent criminals in prison now."



Samuel Francis

that could have mobilized grassroots opposition to the crime bill and stop Mr. Clinton from seizing the law and order issue.

(b) The main objection GOP leaders had to this bill was the presence of "pork" ("social welfare spending"); take out the pork, and they would vote for the bill.

(c) Don't imagine Republicans have any objections to federal meddling in law enforcement; as the letter also said, if the administration "toughened" various provisions of the crime bill and took out the pork, the GOP would go along to get along.

This is the same line with which Minority Leader Newt Gingrich beat the bushes in the past week. He made it clear he cares not a fig for stopping the assault weapons ban and expressed willingness to vote on it separately — thereby ensuring the ban would pass again, as it did the last time with Republican help, and also ensuring a crime bill would pass as well.

"We've said to the NRA it is not fair to kill this [the assault weapons ban] in conference. It has to come back out. It has to survive," Mr. Gingrich insisted. Wouldn't it be nice if the Democrats were as worried about being as "fair" to Republicans as the GOP leader is about being fair to them?

As for the centerpiece of the bill, putting "100,000 new cops on the

street," all Mr. Gingrich could say was that it really "at most puts 20,000" on the street. What he should have said is that we don't need new cops period, and we certainly don't need new cops paid for by the federal leviathan. What cops do is catch criminals, and we have no real problem doing that. Indeed, we've caught so many criminals already we have no more room in our prisons to keep them.

What we need are limitations on parole, early release, plea bargaining and other legal gimmicks that allow known criminals to evade trial, conviction and punishment. But such measures never entered the debate, let alone the bill itself. In their place, we have some 60 fancy death penalties that will never be enforced because most of the offenses to which they apply never occur.

Of course, by the time the votes on the bill approached, it was too late to develop these arguments. By bickering over what was to be included in the bill, the Republicans forfeited rejection of the basic con-

cept of federal involvement in what by nature should be the local matter of law enforcement.

Had the Republicans challenged the very legitimacy of and need for a federal crime bill, they would have forced Mr. Clinton to spend his time defending that concept. Instead, by conceding the legitimacy of federal action on crime

Had the Republicans challenged the very legitimacy of and need for a federal crime bill, they would

have forced Mr. Clinton to spend his time defending that concept. Instead, by conceding the legitimacy of federal action on crime, by failing to reject gun control, by insisting that they too are all for a crime bill and by dwelling to the point of obsessiveness on the irrelevant fiscal and budgetary issue of "pork," the Republicans granted the essential premises of the liberal Clintonian approach to crime, let the president seize the initiative in being "against crime" and "for law and order" and helped Mr. Clinton gain a major political triumph.

Thereby they've allowed Mr. Clinton to swipe their own law-and-order clothing and paint them, despite their professed eagerness for a crime bill, as partisan obstructionists. Thus, the Republicans let him define the issue to his own advantage. Maybe the Stupid Party will do well in this fall's elections, but what difference does that make if all it does is parrot Mr. Clinton's line and help him — time after time after time — pull victory from the jaws of defeat?

Samuel Francis, a columnist for The Washington Times, is nationally syndicated. His column appears here Tuesday and Friday.