

Coalition for Peace Action

Frank von Hippel, 20 March 2016

One of my favorite quotes is from Franklin Roosevelt, "Okay you've convinced me; now go out and bring pressure on me!" The mission of our Coalition for Peace Action is to do both.

The Senate vote on the Iran Nuclear Deal last September is the most recent example. The Republican opponents had a clear majority in the House and the last line of defense for the Deal was in the Senate.

In the Senate, the Republicans majority also was solidly against the deal. Thanks to Senate rules, however, a minority of 40 Senators can block Senate action. Of course, we never give up on anyone. We were able to meet a staffer in the office of Pennsylvania's Republican Senator Toomey but it didn't go well. In response to our first polite question asking about Senator Toomey's position on the Iran Deal, his response was "I sense hostility in the room." I thought that was hilarious because most of our group were Quakers.

So every one of the 44 Democrats and two independents mattered, including the three Democratic Senators from New Jersey and Pennsylvania where the Coalition works. Senator Menendez declared himself against the deal early. That left Corey Booker and Bob Casey.

The American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and affiliated donors were ahead of us lobbying both of the Senators to vote against the deal. Some of the information they provided was misleading, however, and we had to provide the antidote.

Coalition members got up repeatedly at 3 AM to drive to Washington to engage Senator Casey at his 8:30 AM constituent coffee meetings and then to meet with his key staffer, Caitlin Geary. We also met repeatedly with Senators Booker's key staffer, Sophia Lalani, on this issue. They listened to us and passed their improved understanding on to their Senators. They told us later that we did make an important difference.

This is American democracy at its best.

The Coalition has been doing this for 35 years. I remember our annual briefings to Senator Bill Bradley in the late 1980s. We talked a lot about a Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban and helped increase its importance in his thinking and that of other member of Congress.

Ultimately, in 1992, Congress forced the George Bush Senior Administration to join Russia and stop testing. Other countries then came under huge public pressure to join in and, since 1998, only North Korea has tested.

In recent years, the focus of the Coalition has been more on briefing candidates during their campaigns. This reflects the fact that politicians are most accessible during campaigns.

Just two days ago, on Friday, a Coalition group was in Philadelphia briefing Brian Gordon and Dan Muroff who are running in the Pennsylvania primary for the House of Representatives. I was only able to participate by phone but I could hear how eager they were to learn more about nuclear weapons issues.

In New Jersey and Pennsylvania our politicians can vote their consciences on nuclear-weapons issues without having to worry about constituent jobs. They therefore tend to be open-minded when we brief them.

I conclude simply by saying that, if you want to reduce the risk of a nuclear holocaust, there is no more cost-effective way to do so than supporting the Coalition for Peace Action.

I was going to say that you get more bang for the buck from the Coalition but my wife told me that would be politically incorrect.