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Senator Offers Rare Profile In Capitol Hill Courage

Voinovich's Stand Against Bolton May Cost Him

Helen Thomas, Hearst White House columnist

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Every once in a while there is a profile in courage on Capitol Hill.

This phenomenon doesn't happen very often and, in fact, is rarer than ever these days because lawmakers fear -- as do many reporters -- that they will be called "unpatriotic" if they challenge the White House in wartime.

A politician who splits with his own party on a point of principle may suffer ostracism and retaliation for standing up against the president. That's why it is easier for lawmakers to go along to get along.

In my book, Republican Sen. George Voinovich, a former governor of Ohio, is a courageous legislator for opposing the nomination of John Bolton to be U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. He concluded that Bolton is not the man for the job and urged his fellow senators earlier this week to reject the nominee.

Bolton would be a "controversial and ineffective ambassador to the United Nations," Voinovich wrote his colleagues.

What a sham that appointment is. Bolton has shown his contempt for the U.N. and for any of the nations that disagree with his right-wing ideology. He once said there should be only one member of the U.N. Security Council -- the United States -- and that it would be all right with him if a few stories of the U.N. headquarters building were toppled.

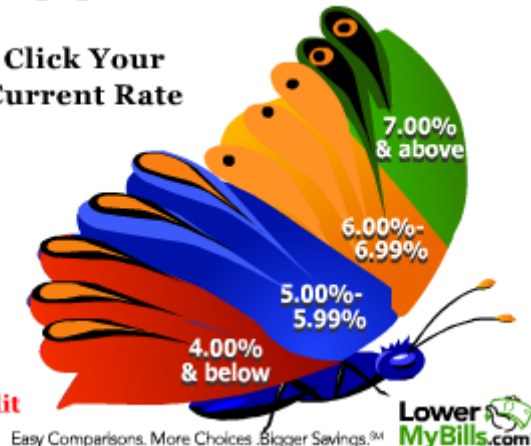
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It's difficult to imagine Bolton as a diplomat, trying to build consensus, working with opponents to solve problems by finding common grounds and earning their respect. He comes off as a thundering, pompous bully-boy, scornful of anyone who doesn't kiss his ring.

He has served in top positions in the Justice Department and State Department, and his detractors from those workplaces are legion, painting a portrait of a headstrong loudmouth, unsuited for a job that requires diplomacy and some finesse.

Troubled by what he has learned about Bolton's past, Voinovich has said that sending Bolton to the U.N. would subvert administration's stated goal of trying to win back friends and allies who have drifted beyond the U.S.' orbit because of the Bush administration's unilateralism and arrogance.

"John Bolton is the poster child of what someone in the diplomatic corps should not be," Voinovich said. "His confirmation will tell the world we are not dedicated to repairing our relationships ... but that we believe only someone with sharp elbows can deal properly with the international community," he added.

Voinovich faced tremendous pressure from the White House, including personal calls from Bush and his top aides, to change his mind and support Bolton. But he stood his ground.

It could cost him politically with his own Republican party or by losing federal funds for a pet project in Ohio. That's how it works.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has acknowledged that Bolton has some problems. He would be "closely supervised," Rice said, in an effort to reassure senators that she intended to keep a tight rein on her U.N. ambassador.

This is hardly a vote of confidence in John Bolton.

A vote on Bolton on the Senate floor is expected soon, possibly by the end of the week.

The White House is standing by the Bolton nomination. Senate Republicans are expected to rally around the nomination and, because they are in the majority, Bolton is likely to win confirmation.

But one GOP senator will stand out in the chamber -- Sen. George Voinovich who had the courage to go against his crowd.

Would that the president had the courage to admit a mistake and withdraw the Bolton nomination.

That will be the day.

(Helen Thomas can be reached at the e-mail address hthomas@hearstdc.com).

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