

Bill Kaplan: Dave Obey to be honored on Capitol Hill

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On May 17, former Wisconsin Democratic Representative Dave Obey will be honored as the Labor HHS Appropriations Room is officially named after him. The two-time Chair of the House Appropriations Committee will be there as his life and work is celebrated by family, friends, staff and members of Congress. It's not the first time.

In 2005, a portrait of Obey was unveiled by the Appropriations Committee. Roll Call reported: "Obey wanted a work that conveyed the ebb and flow of Congress and the fact that he served as both chairman and ranking member on Appropriations. He wanted it to reflect the gap between the rich and the poor. He wanted references to the 'social gospel' and to his 'La Follette progressive' tradition. He wanted a harmonica in the portrait, because of the bluegrass music he plays. He wanted it to be obvious that he's from Wisconsin. And he insisted his wife (Joan) appear in the portrait." The legislative giant earned the portrait.

Wisconsin and the nation lost a champion of the downtrodden and powerless, including rural communities, when Obey announced his retirement in 2010. First elected in 1969, he never stopped seeing regular folks and their needs as he became a budget and appropriations craftsman. Obey fought for family farmers, investment in rural and urban areas, healthcare coverage for all, educational opportunities, security for the elderly and equal rights. At the same time he spoke out against endless unnecessary wars.

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Obey never let politics get in the way during a national crisis. When the economy began a calamitous collapse in 2008 he supported President Bush's plan to prevent disaster. Obey said: "The boy geniuses on Wall Street do not deserve to be rescued. But if they fall off their perch at the top of the economic ladder they will crush innocent people far down that ladder on lower rungs. Sometimes in life, if we are responsible, we have to clean up not just the messes we've created, but the messes that others have created as well." A real populist.

One of Obey's proudest moments was passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). He knew that the GOP-inspired falsehoods and unfounded hysteria would probably lead to many Democrats losing their congressional races. History repeats. Obey told me about a Wisconsin representative who lost after voting for the Social Security Act. However, Obey was confident that as the ACA expanded healthcare coverage, protected those with pre-existing conditions, improved quality and cut costs, it would gain majority support. He was prescient. Today ACA's private insurance covers 14.5 million Americans, including 212,000 Wisconsinites. And, ACA Medicaid expansion covers about 19 million low-income Americans (still blocked in Wisconsin by uncaring GOP legislators).

Obey still has much to say on the future of Wisconsin politics: "The best way for Democrats to win in rural Wisconsin is to campaign there. The focus, money and organizational efforts must be on state legislative races in rural areas." Without rural Wisconsinites, Democrats will be hollow, unrepresentative and weak.

- Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.