

Advocates Will Try Again

House Narrowly Blocks

E.R.A. Shortcut

9/24/83

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NRL NEWS

WASHINGTON -- A sudden attempt by House Speaker Thomas (Tip) O'Neill to ram the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) through the House without amendments was narrowly rejected on November 15. Prolife opposition was one key factor behind the defeat of ERA.

With less than one day's notice, O'Neill brought ERA to the House floor under a special procedure called "suspension of the rules," which is usually used only for minor and noncontroversial matters. Under this special procedure, no amendments could be offered to ERA, and debate was limited to 40 minutes. The procedure permitted only a single, up-or-down vote on ERA.

O'Neill's maneuver failed when ERA fell just six votes short of the two-thirds majority required to pass a constitutional amendment (278-147). Among those voting "no" were a number of supporters of ERA who objected to the "no amendments"

restriction, some of whom wanted an opportunity to attach an amendment to ERA to render it neutral with respect to abortion (the Sensenbrenner Amendment). [See roll call, page 14.]

The attempt to suspend the rules was strongly opposed by NRLC and by a number of other organizations favoring the Sensenbrenner Amendment, including the U.S. Catholic Conference, the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment, the National Association of Evangelicals, the Christian Action Council, the Eagle Forum, and the American Life Lobby.

In a letter sent to members of Congress the day before the vote, NRLC said, "A vote to suspend the rules is a pro-abortion vote, but a vote *against* suspending the rules is *not* a vote against ERA. In voting against suspension, prolife members who are also pro-ERA are voting to allow ERA to come to the floor under regular

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House procedures, so that the abortion-neutralizing amendment can be considered."

In a statement to the House prior to the vote, O'Neill indicated that if ERA had been brought up under an "open rule" which permitted amendments to be offered, the abortion-neutralizing amendment and an amendment dealing with the military draft would have been supported by a majority of the House. He acknowledged that he had used the "suspension of the rules" procedure to shut out these amendments.

The day after the vote, O'Neill was quoted in a press account as saying that he would never permit the Equal Rights Amendment to be amended, and that he intended to bring ERA to the floor again next year under the same "no amendment" procedure. Congress is scheduled to adjourn by Nov. 19 and to reconvene on January 23.

Among those opposing passage of ERA was Rep. Marilyn Lloyd, Democrat of Tennessee. "For those who have in the past supported pro-family legislation in such matters as

abortion and homosexual rights, we stand in jeopardy of undoing in 40 minutes all that we have accomplished over the years," she told the House.

Rep. Romano Mazzoli (D-Ky.), a co-sponsor of ERA, said that O'Neill's attempted legislative shortcut "trivializes the Constitution, the basic document of our land."

Mazzoli said that until the previous week he had not believed that there was any connection between abortion and ERA, but that after participating in the meeting of the House Judiciary

Committee at which the issue was debated, "I had my serious doubts. The experts are divided." Mazzoli voted against the suspension motion.

Some opponents of abortion funding voted for ERA, explaining that they saw no connection between the two issues. However, compelling evidence exists that there is such a connection. This evidence includes Supreme Court precedents and the writings of a number of constitutional experts on both sides of the abortion issue.