

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

APRIL 12, 1976

Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES:

I am today returning, without my approval, H.R. 8617, a bill that would essentially repeal the Federal law commonly known as the Hatch Act, which prohibits Federal employees from taking an active part in partisan politics.

The public expects that government service will be provided in a neutral, nonpartisan fashion. This bill would produce an opposite result.

Thomas Jefferson foresaw the dangers of Federal employees electioneering, and some of the explicit Hatch Act rules were first applied in 1907 by President Theodore Roosevelt. In 1939, as an outgrowth of concern over political coercion of Federal employees, the Hatch Act itself was enacted.

The amendments which this bill make to the Hatch Act would deny the lessons of history.

If, as contemplated by H.R. 8617, the prohibitions against political campaigning were removed, we would be endangering the entire concept of employee independence and freedom from coercion which has been largely successful in preventing undue political influence in Government programs or personnel management. If this bill were to become law, I believe pressures could be brought to bear on Federal employees in extremely subtle ways beyond the reach of any anti-coercion statute so that they would inevitably feel compelled to engage in partisan political activity. This would be bad for the employee, bad for the government, and bad for the public.

Proponents of this bill argue that the Hatch Act limits the rights of Federal employees. The Hatch Act does in fact restrict the right of employees to fully engage in partisan politics. It was intended, for good reason, to do precisely that. Most people, including most Federal employees, not only understand the reasons for these restrictions, but support them.

However, present law does not bar all political activity on the part of Federal employees. They may register and vote in any election, express opinions on political issues or candidates, be members of and make contributions to political parties, and attend political rallies and conventions, and engage in a variety of other political activities. What they may not -- and, in my view, should not -- do is attempt to be partisan political activists and impartial Government employees at the same time.

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The U.S. Supreme Court in 1973 in affirming the validity of the Hatch Act, noted that it represented

"a judgment made by this country over the last century that it is in the best interest of the country, indeed essential, that federal service should depend upon meritorious performance rather than political service, and that the political influence of federal employees on others and on the electoral process should be limited."

The Hatch Act is intended to strike a delicate balance between fair and effective government and the First Amendment rights of individual employees. It has been successful, in my opinion, in striking that balance.

H.R. 8617 is bad law in other respects. The bill's provisions for the exercise of a Congressional right of disapproval of executive agency regulations are Constitutionally objectionable. In addition, it would shift the responsibility for adjudicating Hatch Act violations from the Civil Service Commission to a new Board composed of Federal employees. No convincing evidence exists to justify this shift. However, the fundamental objection to this bill is that politicizing the Civil Service is intolerable.

I, therefore, must veto the measure.

GERALD R. FORD

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