

# Serf City

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*New York Politics from a Libertarian Perspective*

## **Make Congress Read the Bills: An Interview with Jim Babka, President of DownsizeDC.org**

**Serf City:** What is DownsizeDC.org?

**Jim Babka:** DownsizeDC.org gives individuals an opportunity to communicate with their government. It's special because we're attracting a group of people who want to make government smaller, which by the way is most of the population. People can come to the site and put in their contact information. The system tells them who their Representative and Senators are and they're able to send a personalized message. Because those messages are personalized, because they come with contact information and because they are mostly submitted by web form, the congressional office knows they're hearing from a constituent and those messages are counted and read.

**Serf City:** Are you affiliated with a particular political party?

**Jim Babka:** No Downsize DC is non-partisan. If we follow the traditional model for affecting political change, we have to find the right candidate and then help that candidate get elected. Then you have to make sure you elect enough of those candidates to form a bloc or maybe even a majority. Once they are elected you have to keep all those candidates on the straight and narrow. That's a very, very tall order. We are attempting a more direct assault. We want to skip right to step four, which is to keep the incumbent officeholders on the straight and narrow. We know from past experience that, if they are hearing from their constituents, they do count those messages and they do take them into consideration and there are times when you can change the balance of power in a given situation. You can take an issue that seems like it was ready to sail right through and turn it into a real debate or cause them to decide not to vote on the issue for now or even change their vote. We've seen that happen at Downsize DC.

The biggest pitfall if you have faith in trying to elect the right person is the campaign finance laws. The campaign finance laws are basically incumbent protection acts. They're designed to ensure that the person who's holding the office has all the advantages. It makes it very difficult for the challenger. The incumbents, particularly if they're a ranking member or a chairman of the powerful committee, have no trouble raising money. First of all limits to maximum contributions per person. The incumbents can just do more events. It's very easy for them because everyone wants to have access to them. But for a challenger it's like filling a swimming pool with a teaspoon. How are they going to find all those donors? There is no way they can equalize the playing field. If somebody is really passionately in support of a principled candidate and they decided they wanted to write a large check well they can't do that because the maximum contribution is limited. Unfortunately the media pays very close attention to who's raising the most money and how they are spending it so it becomes a sort of sporting event or horserace. It's very difficult for a challenger to raise the necessary funds. That challenger needs more supporters. For those of us who believe the government should be small, let's be blunt: There are not enough of us organized in any way to get that done.

**Serf City:** What is the Read the Bills Act?

**Jim Babka:** The Read the Bills Act is a proposal to actually have members of Congress read the bills, which believe it or not they commonly don't. We were inspired to create the Read the Bills Act after Congress passed intelligence reorganization that created the Intelligence Czar and \$14 billion in new spending. This bill was over 3000 pages long but only one copy was made available to the Republicans and one copy to the Democrats, two hours before the vote. So are we supposed to believe that all the Republicans crowded around over Denny Hastert's shoulder and used their Evelyn Wood speed reading course to read the entire bill? We all know that didn't happen but they voted on it any way.

And there are provisions that have been inserted into bills over the years where everybody was surprised. Some of these provisions are what they call earmarks. They get inserted in bills at the last minute, sometimes in conference committee and that's where a lot of pork comes from. In 2005 Congress passed 13,988 individual pieces of pork costing us \$27 billion. If conservatively estimated that Congress spent one minute to hear each piece of pork read out loud, it would take more than an hour every single business day just to hear the pork being read. We think that if they had to sit and listen to the reading of those bills they'd be passing a lot less pork. They would begin to make choices just like every family does with its budget, just like every worker does with their time.

**Serf City:** What does the bill actually do?

**Jim Babka:** The Read the Bills Act does two things; first it says that Congress should actually have to read their bills. Either they have to sit and listen to them read in Congress or they have to read every word themselves. Either way they have to sign an affidavit saying that they've read the entire bill. The second thing the bill does is a seven-day waiting period. Seven days before they can cast their vote the entire bill has to be posted on the internet so the media, talk show hosts, watchdog groups like Downsize DC and the general public would be able to read the bill for themselves. Gone would be the days when they could sneak things past us at the last second.

**Serf City:** What's the status of Read the Bills Act right now? Has it been introduced into the House or Senate?

**Jim Babka:** No and frankly I'm not the least bit surprised. I don't believe this bill is going to be introduced until we deliver an enormous amount of pressure on the system. We've only just begun in that department. Our first goal is to require them to begin taking questions about it, to begin saying why they won't do it. As people begin to become aware of this bill and realize that their congressmen are refusing to do it, anger will grow and that's how we'll get this passed. I don't expect a Mr. Smith Goes to Washington character to stand up and say, "We were wrong all these years," and then there is a sudden decision for everyone to do the right thing. Politicians are usually not leaders by their nature. They tend to be opportunists who are looking for a parade that is marching somewhere and they want to get out in front of it. At Downsize DC we are attempting to build that parade for the Read the Bills Act and other proposals. We believe that, "If we build it, our politicians will come."

**Serf City:** Who is supporting this and who's opposing it?

**Jim Babka:** There's been no *real* opposition up to this point. In the last couple of months, Read the Bills has become viral in the blogosphere – that is, we're starting to see it pop up in a variety of places. As the idea is being discussed, the first one or two complaints have actually trickled in. Yet I've done dozens of radio interviews about it and in every single instance the host of the show likes the idea – regardless of where they are on the political spectrum. It's hard to pick whose going to be the first politician to do get behind this. I think it's going to be someone who is opportunistic, like a John McCain kind of person, who sees the potential to ride the issue and show he's a man, or woman, of the people. That's the kind of candidate I expect to step forward and do this.

Brian Baird on Democratic side of the aisle has a proposal to read the bills backed by an organization called ReadtheBill.org. Baird is offering a 72 hour proposal. It's just a rule, not a law – it's not binding in any way. It's got all kinds of exceptions and it just covers the House, not the Senate. And there are other people out there that realize that this needs to be done. The Blue Dog Democrats have suggested it. It's been talked about on the Republican side. There's even a Republican congressman who has also proposed a reading provision as a House rule and there's been talk even from the leadership of this Congress about implementing a 24 hour rule. So they are beginning to realize that this needs to be done. And I won't be shy about taking credit for having gotten this started. Downsize DC.org has really pushed it.

**Serf City:** What can people do to support the Read the Bills Act?

**Jim Babka:** The very best thing you can do is go to our website [www.DownsizeDC.org](http://www.DownsizeDC.org). It's a very simple system. It's easy to put in your contact information. Then it tells you who your Senators and Representative are. Then you can easily send a message that you support the Read the Bills Act and that they should too. More than 40 congressional offices are now responding with form letters that indicate they understand what the Read the Bills Act is. Some of them even mention DownsizeDC.org by name. Members also begin receiving the Downsizer-Dispatch email which is a valuable piece of information that you get in your inbox on a fairly regular basis. It's free, but we keep try to keep it lively and interesting. We keep you up-to-date on a variety of things that Congress is up to and the actions you can take to influence Congress along with thousands of other Downsizers across the country.

**Serf City:** What are some of the other issues that you're following?

**Jim Babka:** The longest standing active campaign is the Real ID act. We oppose the passage of this national identity card system. We were successful in stopping it three times. The Senate had lost all interest in it and it wasn't going anywhere until the Administration and the House Republican leadership colluded to place it in the emergency appropriation for the troops in Iraq in May of 2005. The law takes effect next year and everybody has to comply but people have realized how this was snuck in and what a huge boondoggle it is. Homeland Security estimates it will cost \$23 billion to implement it nationwide. Most of that money will come from state governments and they're not at all pleased. It's going to create a single super ID card. That means it's a one stop shop for the black market to duplicate which makes it a prime target for identify theft. It won't really improve security but it puts your personal information at risk. One state has opted out completely; another has said they'll do the same at the end of the year if a series of demands are not met. Several other states won't do the authorization necessary to implement it and have instead passed resolutions opposing it. So the wheels are beginning to fall off the wagon and we're very excited about that. We've been attempting to repeal this since 30 days after it was passed and now are being joined by more than 45 organizations around the country. We're also focused on whistleblower legislation and the Patriot Act. There's a bunch of things, but anyone can see the issues at our home page, DownsizeDC.org.

DownsizeDC.org is really a good deal for the money. We're a small, lean organization. Our plan for growth is focused primarily now, as we continue to grow, on further outreach and expanding the message. The most important thing to know about DownsizeDC is what I call the "strike the root concept" – the thing that matters most.

A lot of people are concerned about the direction of our country and the size of our government and the things that are happening today and they say that they want to change things. They try to pick a magic issue or a magic strategy, and I would say there is no such thing as a silver bullet here. The thing that matters most – the strike the root concept – is to have the biggest army. When you have the most people then you can make the change. Voltaire said "God tends to be on the side of the bigger battalion." At Downsize DC, we believe that's true. So that's our real goal, more than anything else: Build an army that is so large that Congress cannot afford to ignore it – an army so large that we can get the message out there everywhere, every day. When we get to the point that we can get the message out there everywhere, every day we believe we can change the environment – we can change the debate in this country. Our issues will have a seat at the table – the prime seat.