

Shifting From Hard Line

Gingrich Listened, Then Led Colleagues to Deal

By John E. Yang
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For two days, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) had listened. In a marathon of meetings, he heard suggestions, complaints and advice from the House Republicans about what the next step should be in the tortuous budget battle with President Clinton. For most of them the way was clear: no compromise.

By yesterday morning, Gingrich—whose four-step leadership mantra is “listen, learn, help and lead”—had decided the time for listening was gone and the time for leadership had come, according to House Republican leaders.

Gingrich—flanked by his entire

leadership team—stood in the cavernous Cannon Caucus Room and told the assembled House Republicans that they were a team, and being a team meant that they would not always get what they wanted, lawmakers recalled after the closed-door session.

In blunt and forceful words, the speaker said he expected the lawmakers to support his plan to return 280,000 furloughed federal workers to their jobs and fund parts of the government for the rest of the spending year.

“You don’t like the job I’m doing as speaker, run against me,” one attendee recalled Gingrich saying. “You don’t like the job we’re doing,

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run against us.” After about 15 minutes, the meeting was over.

“It was the most unusual conference we’ve had,” said one House GOP leader. “He didn’t leave any room for anybody to vote no,” said Rep. Lamar S. Smith (R-Tex.).

Nearly four hours later, the House overwhelmingly approved the plan with only 15 of the House’s 236 Republicans opposing it, 12 of them freshmen.

The House action marks a significant shift in tactics in the budget showdown between Congress and Clinton. As late as Wednesday, House Majority Leader Richard K. Armey (R-Tex.) and House Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) vowed the House would never end the government shutdown without a Clinton proposal to balance the budget by 2002. Most of the 73 freshmen were equally adamant.

And now Gingrich alone had just persuaded his conference—and his leadership team—to change their hard-line course in a way that they

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THE GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN



BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST

Reps. Constance A. Morella (R-Md.), Albert R. Wynn (D-Md.), Thomas M. Davis III (R-Va.) and Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.) and Sens. Paul S. Sarbanes (D-Md.) and Charles S. Robb (D-Va.) gather with federal employees at a demonstration.

would not feel was a surrender. He devised his plan after listening to the concerns and complaints of a wide range of House Republicans over the course of two days, according to interviews with House GOP leaders, rank-and-file lawmakers and aides.

Gingrich portrayed the new stance as pressuring Clinton to come up with a plan to balance the budget. "The burden now is on his desk," the speaker said yesterday. "It's on his shoulders."

"I don't believe it's caving in," said Rep. Bill Zeff (R-N.H.). "It's giving the president an opportunity to either put up or shut up."

As lawmakers returned to Washington this week after a brief holiday respite, they said they realized that the terrain of the budget battlefield had changed. Clinton had held firm, and public anger over the extended shutdown was beginning to take its toll on the GOP Congress.

"The tactics clearly had to change," said Rep. Steve Gunderson (R-Wis.), a Gingrich ally. "It had become clear that this is taking much longer than anticipated," said a House GOP leader.

House Republican leaders were faced with the possibility of losing

control of the House floor to the Democrats through defections of as many as two dozen GOP lawmakers. They included not only Washington-area lawmakers—Reps. Thomas M. Davis III (Va.), Constance A. Morella (Md.) and Frank R. Wolf (Va.)—who represent a large number of federal workers—but those whose districts include national parks that have been closed and vendors and contractors whose businesses have been affected by the shutdown.

But perhaps most important, GOP lawmakers concluded the shutdown was blurring the focus on their intended message, the importance of eliminating the federal budget deficit. "We need to get the debate off the federal employees and back on balancing the budget," said Rep. Joe Scarborough (R-Fla.), a freshman. "That's the way we win."

One House leader acknowledged that "the time had come for a transition to a longer-term strategy—maybe through the election."

It was against this backdrop that Gingrich began meeting with his leadership team and blocs of lawmakers in sessions that stretched from Wednesday to Thursday. Based on what he had heard, Gingrich—who alone among House GOP leaders was willing to offer Clinton an interim measure to keep the government operating at full force in December—devised a plan to put furloughed federal workers back on the payroll through March 15.

The leaders were so confident about the plan that aides distributed details of it to reporters as Gingrich presented it to a closed-door meeting of House Republicans Thursday

evening and scheduled a news conference to announce it.

Gingrich strongly argued that the federal workers should be put back on the payroll, saying it was "morally wrong and indefensible" to have them "in the cross-fire." But opposition arose from many corners of the Republican conference.

Gingrich quickly changed course, limiting the plan to Jan. 26 and adding a second measure that would reopen all the affected agencies if the president offered a seven-year balanced budget proposal.

"Let's pretend that everything we discussed all day didn't happen," House Republicans recalled him saying. "Let's clear the mind—what should we do?"

For nearly 2½ hours, they told him—and he listened. Moderates complained about the prolonged government shutdown. Conservatives complained that bringing federal workers back to work for 10 weeks would diminish their leverage with Clinton.

At the end of the meeting late Thursday night, Gingrich said he would consider what he had heard and that the conference would gather again the next morning. The leadership huddled in Arney's congressional office across the hall in the Cannon House Office Building, where Gingrich spelled out the plan that would be presented the next day.

"Enough of this democracy crap," Majority Whip DeLay joked to a reporter afterward.

House Republicans praised the outcome as addressing their various concerns. Federal workers would be getting paychecks again, but federal

programs would not be funded unless Clinton proposed a plan in the next three weeks to eliminate the federal budget deficit by 2002.

"Most people felt we had the best of both worlds—input and leadership," said Gunderson.

Staff writer Eric Pianin contributed to this report.