

GOP Trying To Avert 3rd Shutdown

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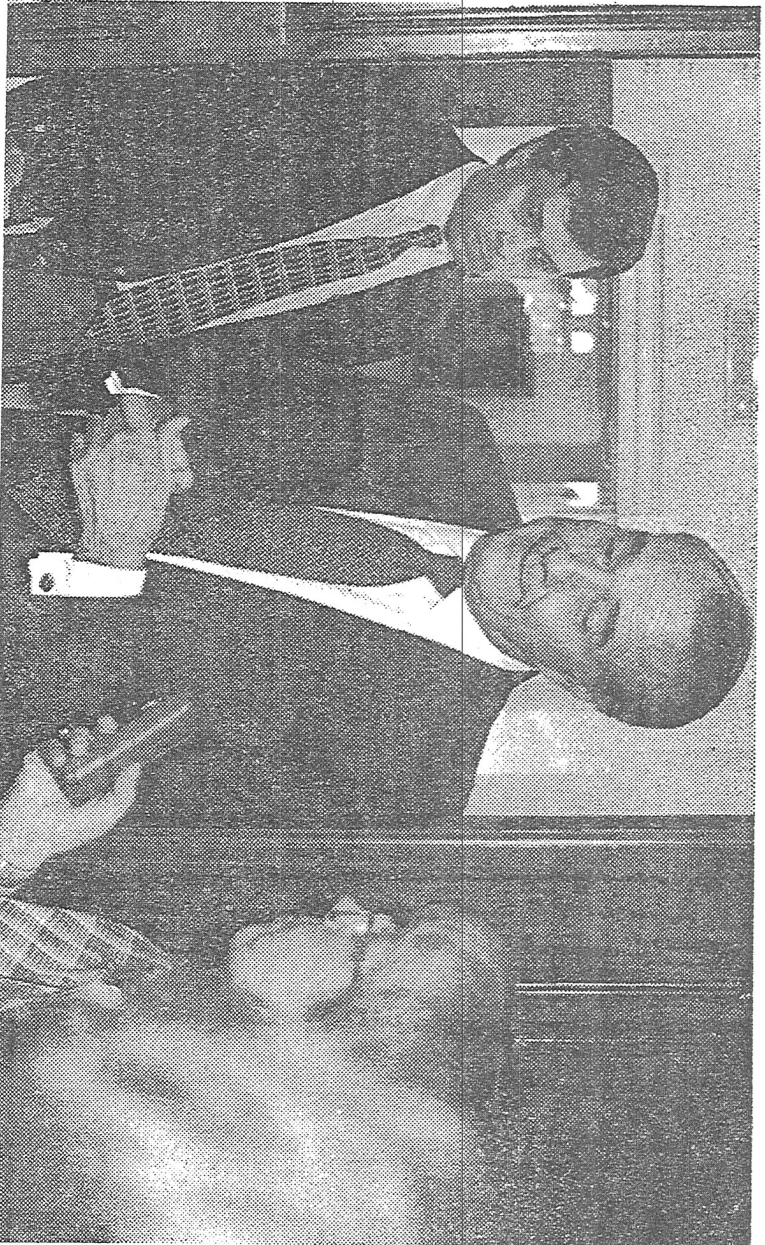
Battle-weary congressional Republicans yesterday worked out details of a plan to avoid another politically risky shutdown with President Clinton over the budget and keep the government operating through March 15.

The latest temporary measure funding nine government departments and dozens of agencies runs out Friday at midnight. Republicans have said they want to avoid another partial government shutdown, but they also want to keep pressure on Clinton to agree to a balanced budget plan.

The evolving GOP strategy would continue to squeeze 1996 federal spending and terminate a dozen or more programs, but Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) indicated no effort will be made to go after the national service program or other high-priority administration programs that have been targeted by Republicans for elimination.

However, House Appropriations Committee Chairman Bob Livingston (R-La.) said that the new legislation "probably will" eliminate a provision contained in previous interim measures that had protected federal employees from being laid off without pay.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) told reporters that the budget talks with the White House were "for all practical purposes not functional," and Republicans were seeking ways to begin implementing small pieces of their



After leaving the Senate floor, Majority Leader Robert J. Dole is questioned by reporters at his office about the budget, continuing resolutions and the debt limit. In the background is Clarkson Hine, Dole's press secretary.

BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST

balanced budget plan. "We're trying to work for first of all how to get a down payment on a balanced budget because of the president's refusal to put a serious proposal on the table," he said.

"There's still some glimmer of hope we may come together on a balanced budget," Dole said yesterday. But he said the talks won't resume until Clinton takes the initiative and agrees to fundamental changes in Medicare, Medicaid and other costly entitlement programs.

Gingrich and Dole have had to walk a thin line in crafting a plan that would continue to apply sufficient pressure to the administration to keep restive GOP conservatives satisfied but without inviting another veto that would trigger the third partial government shutdown since November.

Details of the GOP plan for keeping

the government going through March 15 were still being worked out late last night and are subject to review today by rank-and-file House and Senate Republicans, many of whom want to use the spending measure to force Clinton into a budget deal.

Congressional Republican leaders have been stung by polls showing that Americans have blamed them more than Clinton for the past two shutdowns. However, a new Washington Post-ABC News poll suggests that confidence in Clinton's handling of the budget issue is beginning to erode, although at nowhere near the level of disagreement with GOP handling of the issue.

The poll, taken of 1,005 adults Thursday through Sunday, indicates

that Americans, 50 percent to 42 percent, disapprove of the way Clinton is handling the dispute over the federal budget. Two weeks ago, by 50 percent to 46 percent, more respondents approved of his handling of the issue.

At the same time, Republicans get overwhelmingly bad grades for their performance, grades that have remained in the cellar for two months of budget talks and government shutdowns. In mid-November, 71 percent of those questioned disapproved of GOP handling of the issue, 21 percent approved. In the latest poll, the numbers were about the same: 74 percent disapproval, 20 percent approval.

Administration officials have been bracing for what they long predicted would be public disgust with both sides if gridlock went on and on. The latest polls show the start of that, but only the start, and give Republicans little comfort as they prepare for the next stage of their battle with the president.

Overall, the poll shows Clinton's approval rating as holding up, at 51 percent, although more disapprove of his handling of the economy, 48 percent to 45 percent, than approve of it. In addition, 58 percent think the economy is getting worse compared to the 27 percent who think it is getting better. And on the eve of a State of the Union address in which Clinton plans to declare the state of the union strong, most Americans—66 percent—continue to believe the country is on the wrong track.

While the heart of the dispute is over a long-term balanced budget plan, the more immediate threat of another gov-

ernment shutdown stems from the inability of Republicans and the White House to agree on six of 13 major spending bills for the fiscal year that began Oct. 1.

A new short-term spending measure is needed to keep nine Cabinet departments and three dozen other agencies operating beyond the Friday midnight deadline, which was set by legislation cleared by Congress and the president Jan. 5 to a three-week shutdown.

Livingston said the GOP extension under consideration would keep the government running "fundamentally at the same level" as now, with no programs funded at lower than 75 percent of last year's levels. However, he said that between 12 and 20 programs would be terminated, although the specific programs had not yet been agreed to last night.

Later, after a meeting with GOP leaders, Livingston said that there would be some things in the new legislation that would give the president "heartburn." He said, "It won't be easy for him, but it won't be easy for us to sell to our conference either. . . . That's what makes a compromise."

Staff writer Ann Devroy contributed to this report.

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