



SEN. ROBERT J. DOLE

... GOP rivals are ganging up

Friends, Foes Fault Dole's Performance

*Rebuttal to Clinton
Also Splits Advisers*

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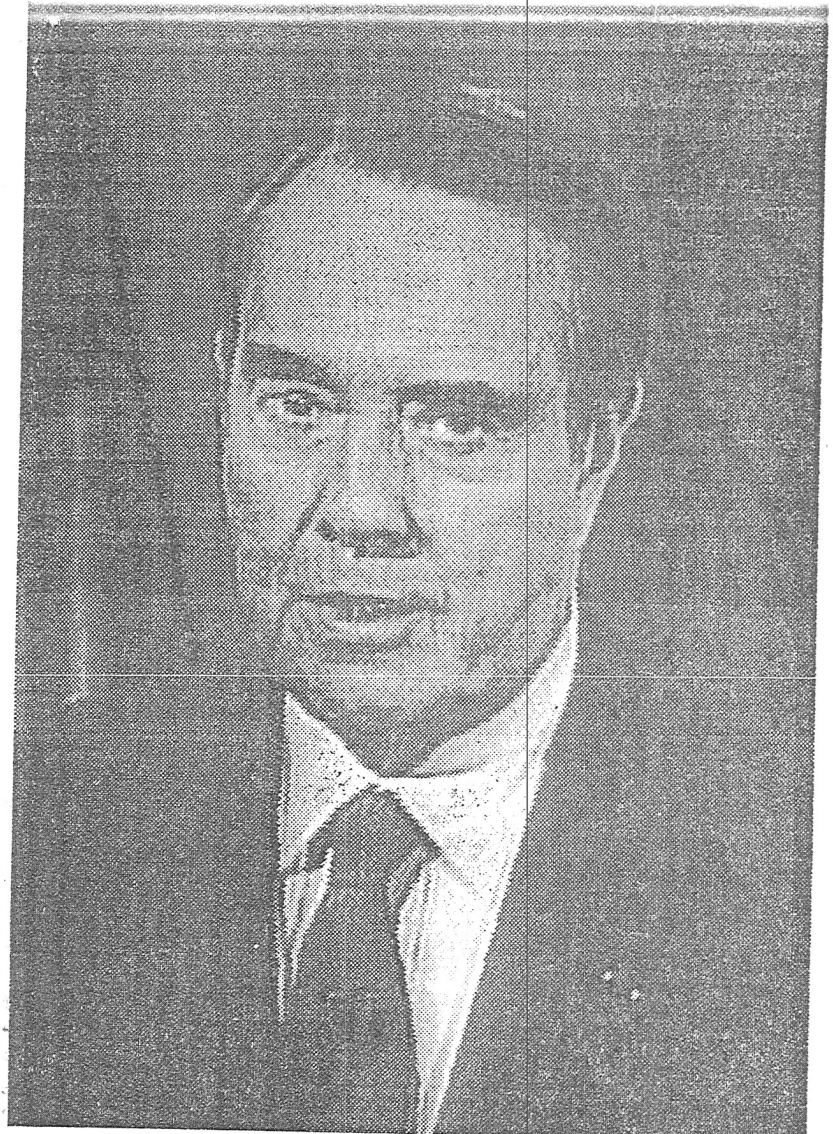
Rebutting President Clinton's State of the Union address Tuesday night was supposed to show Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole at his best: a strong, seasoned leader carrying the flag for his party.

But instead, Dole's performance generated lukewarm appraisals from many Republicans and gave his presidential rivals another opening to assert that Dole is no match for Clinton one on one.

Initial television network polls suggest that a majority of Americans liked Clinton's version of the nation's state better than Dole's and focus groups of voters panned Dole's performance and message. And yesterday the GOP contenders ganged up on their front-running rival, accusing him of delivering an uninspiring response to Clinton and wasting a precious opportunity to articulate the GOP's agenda.

The Dole campaign brushed off the criticism as new signs of desperation from the back of

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Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole's speech gave his rivals another opening to assert that he is no match for television-smooth President Clinton.

DOLE, From A1

the pack. But there is a division emerging among Dole campaign strategists over the wisdom of trying to counter a live hour-long speech from a master communicator in the grand setting of the House of Representatives with a 12-minute rebuttal from Dole's office.

It was not, however, just Dole's rivals picking at him. Even some Dole supporters expressed concern about their candidate's presentation.

Lewis Keller, Broward County (Fla.) Republican Party chairman and a Dole backer, said the Kansan did not come across "as strongly as I would have liked him to come across. There's a thing called political sex appeal, and in this age of TV it is important."

Dole's opponents yesterday sharpened a theme they have planted with limited success on the campaign trail: When up against the smoother, more polished Clinton, the 35-year veteran of Washington's ways will not fare well.

"I think the Republican Party lost the battle of ideas" Tuesday night, said Patrick J. Buchanan, a former White House speechwriter, campaigning in New

Hampshire. "For the last four months, we've been getting our clocks cleaned by President Bill Clinton." The message Republicans should take away from Dole's speech, Buchanan added, "was that our pitcher got shelled and we've got to go to the bullpen if we want to win the series."

Dole's rivals, who for the most part languish far behind in the polls, have been trying out versions of that critique for months: Dole, they say, lacks vision, is devoid of fresh ideas, is generationally out of touch, is a creature of process-oriented Washington. But only publishing heir Malcolm S. "Steve" Forbes Jr., aided by a \$10 million media advertising campaign that labels Dole "just another Washington politician," has managed to gain ground on the front-runner. He has climbed into second place in the early primary states.

Stumping in Des Moines yesterday, Forbes said he wished the majority leader would have provided the nation "more of a vivid contrast" with Clinton. "The key is the message," said Forbes. "The message must be one of high ground, of getting America moving again, removing obstacles to progress."

In a telephone conversation with reporters while campaigning in Iowa, Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) said, "There has been a growing belief at the grass-roots level in these early primary states where people are starting to pay attention that Bob Dole could not win. I think last night simply crystallized that concern."

Republican leaders of the House and Senate alternate choosing who responds to a Clinton speech. This turn, Dole chose himself. While the president borrowed liberally from Republican themes and talked often in upbeat tones about pulling the nation together, Dole responded with critical assessments of Clinton's leadership in a rebuttal written by campaign communications director Mari Maseng Will. To some Republicans, Dole seemed uncomfortable and sounded flat.

There was division yesterday among Dole advisers about whether he should have given the response. "Nobody asked me if it was a good idea," said one strategist. "Had someone asked me, I would have said don't do it, because it is such a stacked deck."

Simply put, some advisers concede, Clinton is tough to beat in the television arena. Dole's deficiency before the camera is one reason he is not seen speaking straight to the camera in any of his paid television advertising. "Some guys are good at it, some aren't," said a Dole adviser.

But other campaign officials played down the comparison of the two men, and said the most important concern to the campaign was speaking directly to Republican primary voters.

In his remarks, Dole said Clinton "may well be the rear guard of the welfare state," the "chief obstacle to a balanced budget" and "the last public defender of a discredited status quo."

"It is as though our government, our institutions and our culture have been hijacked by liberals and are careening dangerously off course," Dole said.

"I think when you assess something like this, you have to assess it from a strategic point of view," said Bill Lacy, Dole's deputy campaign manager. In Lacy's view, Dole's speech raised questions about Clinton's credibility in keeping his promises while offering his views about where he would take the country.

"The only flak we're getting is from the guys way back in the pack," Lacy said. "Those guys are frustrated right now. They're not moving. They don't have anything going for them. They're going to attack anything Bob Dole does right now."

Campaign spokesman Nelson Warfield said Dole would "not seek to compete with Bill on style points."

Campaigning in Iowa, Dole continued to challenge Clinton's credibility on the issues of welfare reform and cutting taxes. "He promised a tax cut in '92 and we're still waiting," Dole said.

Sen. Robert F. Bennett (R-Utah), a Dole supporter, said it is easy to criticize the leader after Tuesday's night performance, but he was in a tough spot.

"Senator Dole had a mission to perform that's always tough," Bennett said. "He has to talk into a TelePrompTer and respond to a speech delivered before a live audience that is very responsive. . . . I don't think we have seen the kind of television persona that Dole will present in the general election campaign. Bob Dole, up close and in person, is a very impressive, very convincing, very charismatic individual."

Staff writers Edward Walsh in Iowa, Thomas B. Edsall in New Hampshire and Howard Kurtz in Washington contributed to this report.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To read the text of Dole's response to the State of the Union, see *Digital Ink*, The Post's on-line service. To learn about *Digital Ink*, call 202-334-4740.