

GOP Freshmen Adjust To Siege, Not Revolution

House Leaders Blamed at Painful Forum

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BALTIMORE, Jan. 26—Rep. Linda A. Smith (R-Wash.) was attending a symposium for freshman and sophomore House Republicans this morning, becoming increasingly impatient as yet another speaker exhorted them to “never give up, never give in.”

Finally she could stand it no longer. She rose out of her chair in the hotel ballroom.

“We’ve already compromised,” said Smith, venting her frustration at the way President Clinton seems to have gotten the upper hand over Speaker Newt Gingrich & Co. in the balanced budget wars. “Our leaders left the table. As soon as they left the table . . . we lost the battle.”

Thus, at the conference sponsored by two conservative think tanks, the Heritage Foundation and Empower America, Smith gave public voice to the private lament that

many of her colleagues have been expressing since Wednesday, when Gingrich was forced to acknowledge his failure this year to achieve a seven-year deal to balance the budget, and was compelled to give his pledge to avoid another government shutdown.

To Smith and other freshmen, this was the week when things fell apart, the week when their hopes for a new American revolution crashed head-on into political reality. This was the week, they complained bitterly,

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Senate Votes To Extend Funding

■ The Senate yesterday approved legislation to keep the government running until March 15. A box with story lists many provisions.

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when they had to watch Clinton outmaneuver them, delivering a State of the Union address that appropriated many of their most cherished themes and forced their own leaders to fold under pressure.

“I think it will take 20 years” to enact the House Republican “Contract With America,” sighed freshman Rep. Sam Brownback (Kan.), noting that by then, he will be 57 years old and, because of a self-imposed term-limit, 10 years out of the House.

Only two of 10 campaign pledges embodied in the contract have become law.

“The freshmen were expecting to storm the Crystal Palace,” said John J. Pitney Jr., a Claremont McKenna College political scientist. “Now they have to realize that it’s not a blitz but a siege.”

The House GOP freshmen and many of their sophomore colleagues had come to Congress vowing to change the culture of Washington and to reshape fundamentally the federal government. For months their rallying cry was: “Balance the budget—now.” They cast perilous votes on Medicare and Medicaid. They shut down the federal government rather than compromise their principles, and vowed to keep it shut until Clinton caved in.

But now, as they gathered to lick their wounds and fashion an agenda for the upcoming congressional session—a meeting that started three hours late Thursday night because they were passing a bill Clinton could accept to keep the government open—the freshmen especially are facing some cold truths.

Some were trying to put the best face on it. “You have to talk reality,” said Rep. Jon Christensen (Neb.). “Reality is that you have to look at another option. . . . We have to go at this a whole other way.”

“Right now we’re seeing a shift of strategy,” said Rep. David M. McIntosh (Ind.). “We’re going from ‘Let’s get a budget agreement and accomplish a large number of our goals quickly’ to ‘Okay, that won’t work, so let’s a) get done what we can, and b) run for reelection on the rest of it.’ Anytime you shift a strategy that way, that’s painful and can be demoralizing.”

“Compromise might be a dirty word,” said freshman Rep. Mark Foley (Fla.), “but it’s still the only word that works.”

Rep. Dick Chrysler (Mich.), wearing a button proclaiming “I’m a Freshman . . . And Proud of It” on his green polo shirt, said reinforcements would be needed to finish the job.

"What we need is one more election," he said, to bring more Republicans to the House and Senate and put one in the Oval Office. "We have opened the window in 1994 with this great freshman class, but in 1996 we're going to crawl through that window."

The freshmen begin their first re-election campaigns with their campaign promises from 1994 largely unfulfilled. At today's session, they blamed Clinton, the Senate and even faulted Gingrich for the disastrous budget negotiations, and goped for what their next step should be.

In one of the post-mortems, second-term Rep. Vernon Ehlers (Mich.) said Clinton never bargained in good faith, lied about the Republican plans on Medicare and put his own political interests ahead of the national interest. "We were handicapped as Republicans because we have principles and tell the truth," he said.

Others found fault with Gingrich. It was a liability, said Rep. Mark Edward Souder (Ind.), that "Gingrich sometimes is wont to look at the big picture and not focus on the specifics." Souder also complained that his leaders "tried to move with a new strategy every two weeks." Things improved when House Majority Leader Richard K. Arney (R-Tex.) got involved, he said.

Souder ran afoul of Gingrich earlier this month when he voted against the speaker's plan to reopen the government, a matter the speaker made a test of his leadership. As a result, Gingrich did not make a scheduled appearance at a Souder fund-raising event.

This afternoon, the freshmen issued their principles for this year, pledging to work to bring about a smaller federal government and more effectively communicate with "the American people to restore enthusiasm, faith and hope in a better, brighter future."

Some of the lawmakers also said it was important to move on to other issues—including parts of the campaign Contract with America that have stalled—in order to try to build a record of accomplishments for the upcoming campaign. "Let's wrap up the [budget] issue [for the year] so we can take on the remaining issues," Foley said.

Christensen said it was important to move on to social issues, which Gingrich decided not to emphasize in favor of economic issues last year. "A lot of people who worked hard to get us here and we need to deliver on some things for them," he said.

But at this gathering, optimistically called an "advance" rather than a "retreat," speaker after speaker has

urged the freshman and sophomore lawmakers to ignore the polls and criticism.

"You should stay the course, hang in," declared William J. Bennett, President Ronald Reagan's education secretary. "You should look down the barrel of the gun—the media or your reelection—and you should hang in. . . . You haven't gone too far, we've done barely anything yet."

The freshmen are not alone in struggling to determine what the next step will be. Gingrich speaks of this as a time of "transition," but no one seems to know where that transition will lead. "The long-term strategy is still evolving," said a House GOP leader. "Wait until next month—the picture should be clearer." One GOP leadership aide told a reporter, "I'd like to give you the spin, but the fact is I don't know what the hell is going on."

House leaders are trying to dispel the idea that this latest turn in the budget fight means they have given up on their efforts to balance the budget.

"There's a pause," Arney said today, likening it to watching a videotape. "We're going frame-by-frame. . . . It's going to be that sort of stop-and-go progress until after the election."

The leaders are also using this time to try to burnish their public image,

tarnished so badly over the last few months as the government shut down twice as congressional leaders and Clinton bickered over the budget.

"We worked this through with the administration," House Appropriations Committee Chairman Bob Livingston (R-La.) said Thursday night after the House passed a short-term spending bill to keep the government open. "It shows we can all work together."

"They are trying to restore their image as people who want to make the government work," said William F. Connelly Jr., a Washington and Lee University political scientist and coauthor, with Pitney, of a book on House Republicans. "The new friendly and cooperative countenance is because they're being realistic."

One veteran GOP lawmaker criticized the freshmen, faulting them for caving. "I'm disappointed the freshmen have changed their position," said Rep. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.), a fifth-term lawmaker who has vowed not to vote to increase the federal government's debt limit without a seven-year balanced budget agreement. "They say they aren't worried about themselves, that they're worried about maintaining a Republican majority. That's a code word for worrying about themselves."