

GOP Moderates Seeking 'Meaningful Role' in Party

House Leadership Now Appears Conciliatory, but Conservatives Still Dominate Caucus

By Dan Balz

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When Republican moderates in the House gathered for a one-day retreat last week, they had a bone to pick with House Majority Leader Richard K. Arney (R-Tex.).

During the final weeks of the campaign, the often-outspoken majority leader was quoted saying several unflattering things about the moderates in his own party as he stumped for GOP candidates in the South.

One quote ended this way: "We tossed them a bone and they bit us in the leg." Another, describing the motivation behind his drive to elect more southern conservatives, was: "One of the things we've learned is we've got to be strong enough to outvote our own moderates."

Arney's comments—which he said were misunderstood—may have reflected the views of party conservatives before the elections, but with a diminished GOP majority in the House and President Clinton talking about bipartisanship and the "vital center," the GOP moderates are demanding a much louder voice within their party.

Moderate Republicans showed extraordinary loyalty to the GOP agen-

da in the 104th Congress and it cost some of them their seats. Next year they may be more likely to demonstrate greater independence or force the party to move somewhat more toward the center.

Rhetorically, at least, Arney, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.) and other Republican leaders have been encouraging to the moderates. But with the House GOP caucus still dominated by conservatives and southerners, those in the moderate block say they remain wary about all the nice words they have been hearing since Nov. 5.

"I think we have to have absolutely solid commitments—and I haven't heard those solid commitments—that we are going to have a role in setting the agenda and the priorities before the fact," said Rep. Marge Roukema (N.J.). "The moderates have to have a meaningful role so that we're not school-lunches or 'Mediscared' again."

Democrats portrayed Republicans as heartless for proposing budgets that reduced the growth in spending on school lunch programs and Medicare.

In his meeting with moderates on Tuesday, Arney, whose tongue has tripped him up before, explained that

his comments, which were carried in the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and widely faxed around Capitol Hill, were misunderstood. He wasn't really talking about the moderates in his own party, he claimed. "We took him on about that," said Rep. Fred Upton (Mich.). "He did a little *mez culpa*."

Arney told the group that he was criticizing organized labor—and the fact that labor continued to pour millions of dollars into campaigns to defeat Republican incumbents despite some moderates having taken up labor's cause in the minimum wage debate. "The whole conversation was in the context of unions and labor issues," explained Michele Davis, Arney's spokeswoman.

Gingrich also took steps last week to reassure moderates that they will have more influence in the 105th Congress than they did in the 104th Congress. Among the changes he announced was the disbanding of the Speaker's Advisory Group, which had functioned as his inner circle, while offering moderates one slot at the table when the larger leadership committee meets next year.

In another step that moderates interpreted as a rebuff to some conservative Republicans, the GOP caucus rejected a proposal that would have given the membership the authority to review the appointment of subcommittee chairs, a proposal seen as an effort to discourage members from showing their independence on issues.

A number of moderates, who banded together last year as the Tuesday Lunch Bunch, said those changes, while helpful, still leave them at the mercy of a caucus that remains dominated by conservatives. That is one reason they remain cautious in declaring that the atmosphere will be dramatically different for them next year.

"The tone of the leadership is more conciliatory than it was," said Rep. Michael N. Castle (Del.). "They want to listen and be more inclusive. They are being much less partisan in their approach. . . . Having said that, we haven't seen any of this work yet. It's very good to give visionary speeches and talk about bipartisanship. It's another to put it into legislation."

Republican moderates in the House represent a beleaguered and yet crucial part of the party's future. While they are heavily outnumbered, they nonetheless embody the party's

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hopes of reestablishing their national coalition following Clinton's victory over Robert J. Dole. Dole won no electoral votes in the Northeast and only 29 across the Midwest and Great Plains, a shellacking that has caused a few Republicans to worry about survival in a region that was considered the heart of the party.

"The moderates will tell you that [the election] was a message for disaster in the Northeast, where we lost seats," Castle said. "The margins for Clinton over Dole were in the range of 17 to 18 percentage points in the Northeast and not much less in the Midwest. It is really a problem of the basic Republican vote. Individuals were able to hold seats, but it really hurt. Are we becoming a party that is really regionalized? Did this really put a stamp on it?"

Rep. Charles F. Bass (N.H.), who survived a stiff challenge and an assault from organized labor to win a second term, said Republicans are "almost gone" in his region, and that the party must move quickly to protect itself.

"I have talked a lot with leadership about the need to build a message that will resonate in the Northeast and give candidates who want to run for office an agenda that is attractive," Bass said. "Nobody in leadership has said they don't agree that we have to do something significant and proactive in that area. Even Dick Armey and [Majority Whip] Tom DeLay and obviously the speaker have expressed deep concern about that situation."

The Tuesday Lunch Bunch, which broadly speaking encompasses 40 to 50 Republicans, hopes to create an agenda that will help soften the party's image nationally and develop an early warning system that will head off some of the problems that occurred in the 104th Congress, particularly on issues like school lunches and Medicare.

"We're all for a balanced budget," Upton said. "But we desperately want to put a human face on those budget priorities, particularly education. The [GOP] platform called for [the Department of Education's] elimination. So did last year's budget. If that's in there next year, they won't have the votes to pass it."

Moderates take pride in helping push their GOP colleagues in the final months of the 104th Congress to pass legislation such as the minimum wage bill or the Kennedy-Kassebaum health care act that allows many workers to keep their insurance if they change jobs. But moderates also know that many of their conservative colleagues—particularly those in the Conservative Action Team—reject their analysis of what caused the party's problems in the past two years.

"They don't want moderates to control the agenda in Congress and they feel the reason we were so weak this year was we didn't stick to our guns," Bass said, adding a moment later: "I think they are concerned because the agenda is so different. The agenda of two years ago was so conservative and they don't know what the agenda is in this Congress."

If other Republicans fail to listen to moderates, Clinton may attempt to turn them into part of his centrist coalition next year. So far there have been no overtures from the White House, but GOP moderates anticipate the climate will be far different next year than it was in Clinton's first two years, when he spurned offers from some Republicans to work together on issues like health care.

"With our group growing in strength, our group is going to be important in the scheme of things," Upton said. "Somebody in the White House is going to figure that out."

But right now, moderates hope to make themselves a more vital part of the GOP coalition. "We cannot be a national majority party without this kind of national coalition," Roukema said. "That includes us. . . . We can be very helpful to our party—and very constructive."