

Government Gabfest

The president presides over open-ended raps about policy. One of them was before an open fire over pasta with shrimp. Does it sound like a Renaissance Weekend, the Clintons' favorite New Year's combination of encounters and high-flown gab?

Well, it is, just without the hugs and the golf and the confessions. Nobody at the White House seminar on the government shutdown has told a humbling anecdote about throwing up onstage at age 6 in the school play, as did Education Secretary Richard Riley at the real Renaissance doings. That is in the Hilton Head tradition of establishing vulnerability—which none of the White House participants wish to project.

Apparently, Bill Clinton is right at home in these extraordinary sessions with the leaders of the government. Of course, he is at home, which helps, and there are few things he relishes more than a good go-round about the fine print in Medicare regulations. He is "totally engaged" is the word out of the Cabinet Room.

The stretchout of the shutdown does not cause him uncommon angst. He detailed on national television the difficulties it causes and with every hour, he feels, voters learn more about Republican plans to shut down government programs that aid ordinary folks. If he gives in, he is signaling the country it will have bigger trouble than not being able to see the Vermeer paintings at the National Gallery or the baby giraffe at the National Zoo. They won't be able to see their children going to college, under the Republican loan program.

A Democrat was heard moaning low that the Republicans pulled back on some of their more alienating schemes as the public got wind of them. If only, the lament goes, they had stuck to their notion of charging middle-aged children for their parents' nursing home care, "we could have won the House back with that one." But another, to convert Medicaid to a block-grant program, is distressing.

Voluble though he can be, the president is nowhere near the champion talker in these unprecedented seances. House Speaker Newt Gingrich never shuts up. That may be because the speaker is somebody who feels that the world should

know at every minute exactly what he thinks and feels. Or it may be that he is under severe pressure. His pride and joy, the House freshmen, are questioning his authority and insisting they hold the key to the solution.

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Gingrich found it necessary to confide to national television that he finds it "impossible" to dislike the president. This kind of talk arouses the animosity of the conservatives' mastiff, House Majority Leader Dick Armey. Ever vigilant for signs of softness, and doctrinal wavering, he growls when Gingrich puts forth a suggestion that Armey thinks fails to convey the militancy and resolve of the frightening freshmen.

Dole is the sphinx of the gatherings. He does not enjoy long, rambling philosophical discussions of social problems. He gets enough in his daily routine. He is a results-oriented politician, not an ideologue. He is like a hound waiting to pick up the scent of a solution. His situations in the talks dramatize his dilemma as a candidate.

He is presenting himself as a political leader, but he cannot project the image when he cannot prevail in congressional disputes. He proposed a continuing resolution that would have brought back to work 280,000 furloughed employees and paid those who have been working without pay.

The House vetoed it. The split in the party could not be more vividly illustrated.

There must be days when Dole wishes he were not majority leader, so he could run free in New Hampshire among the birches and the ferns.

With the speaker talking nonstop, and House Budget Committee Chairman John Kasich chiming in with numbers and projections, there are not many gaps in the conversation or direct exchanges between the two men who will face each other in the presidential campaign.

Have they been sizing each other up? They've spent some 20 hours together lately. That enforced intimacy will be felt when they sit down to debate in the fall. They can no more be remote with each other than two people who have gone to school together, and have a working knowledge of each other's body English and flash points.

Clinton has had the advantage in their White House dialogue. His party may be no more united than Dole's. But at least the people in the room, Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle and House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt, agree with him.

And he does not have rival candidates ready to drop on him like leopards from the trees. Phil Gramm and Pat Buchanan are poised to jump Dole no matter what he does. He probably can't wait to have this counterfeit Renaissance Weekend come to a close.