

Dole's Stand Risks Riling Conservatives

Hard-Liners Blast Bill To Open Government

By Helen Dewar
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After months of courting conservatives needed to win the Republican presidential nomination, Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (Kan.) is now risking their wrath in his high-profile break with House GOP hard-liners' strategy of keeping the government closed to get an agreement on a balanced budget.

Dole acknowledged the criticism yesterday but stuck to his guns, insisting in an interview that he was pursuing the course of true conservatism: "People should work for their money."

In pushing legislation through the Senate Tuesday to put the government back in full operation after 18 days of partial shutdown, Dole took his biggest step so far in distancing himself from the party's right-bigger even than his grudging and hedged support for President Clinton's deployment of U.S. troops in Bosnia.

House Republican leaders pummeled him in Washington; Sen. Phil Gramm (Tex.), a conservative rival for the GOP nomination, flailed at him in New Hampshire; even some of his Senate colleagues warned that he could suffer if his strategy fails to produce a budget agreement.

"If it [budget negotiations] is settled soon, there's no problem," said Sen. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.), the head of Dole's presidential campaign in New England. "But if it is not settled soon, it is a problem. Everyone's going to be looking for someone to blame, and, even if it's not right, it [Dole's support for reopening the government] is a highly visible event to lay blame on."

"I don't think it can be anything but risky," said Eddie Mahe, a veteran Republican consultant.

"It's this kind of behavior that

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leads a lot of conservatives to have concerns about Bob Dole," Mahe added. "It may be Bob Dole at his best and worst. At his best, he does know how to make government function. The worst is that sometimes the price he's willing to pay is higher than some people believe should be paid."

While Dole went out of his way to smooth the ruffled feathers—suggesting, for instance, that Clinton say something nice about House Republican leaders before yesterday's round of budget talks—he appeared personally as well as politically comfortable with his position.

In the interview, Dole conceded that some House Republicans disagree strongly with his position but reached back to his midwestern roots to defend it. "I come from Kansas where we believe people ought to work if they're paid," he said.

Dole also acknowledged that he had doubts about the strategy of closing the government as leverage to force a budget deal. He was instrumental in ending an initial six-day shutdown in late November.

It is not as though "Clinton is wincing every day because the government is shut down," he said. "It's not having any impact. . . . If we had a point to make, we made it."

With a touch of the populism that he brought with him from Kansas, Dole also expressed sympathy for the 760,000 federal employees who are furloughed or working without pay. "I know it's sort of macho and all that stuff, but there are human beings out there" who are suffering, he said. "There are not many rich people working for the federal government. They have mortgages to pay, they have vacation plans, they have all kinds of plans, they have illnesses."

He shares other Republicans' desires to cut government down to size, including abolishing some government departments, he said, but "we should do it upfront, with legislation," rather than through shutdowns that affect needed as well as unneeded services.

Some political strategists have suggested that Dole's move to end the shutdown reflects a view that he has already won the nomination and must now reposition himself to run a centrist campaign against Clinton in the fall. Dole vehemently denied it, and some of his close advisers dismissed

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the suggestion as nonsense.

"Dole will not believe he has the nomination until they hand it to him at the convention," said a longtime associate. "He's run for national office three times and hasn't made it. He's not taking anything for granted."

Others suggested he had simply run out of patience with House Republican tactics that he believed were counterproductive, in terms of both political and governmental impact. Still others said he seems to feel comfortable enough about his dual jobs of running the Senate and running for president that he is reasserting his old self.

But not all Republican colleagues were happy, especially on his right flank.

Freshman Sen. James M. Inhofe (R-Okla.) said Dole made his move to reopen the government without consulting many of his colleagues, leaving them defending the old position just as he was embarking on a new one. Inhofe said he also disagrees with Dole's new position. "The only pressure we had [in the budget talks] was the leverage" of a government shutdown, he said.

In New Hampshire, Gramm said Dole was giving Clinton "a new credit card" without forcing him to agree to a balanced budget.

"Whether Republicans were right or wrong when we grabbed this tiger by the tail, to simply let the tiger go now without forcing the president onto a budget . . . is to guarantee that all of this is just for nothing," Gramm said. "I am very frustrated."

Gramm also said Dole's move provided fresh evidence of a weak commitment to the House Republicans' "Contract With America" and the principles that Republicans campaigned on in winning control of Congress in 1994. "There's no doubt about the fact that Senator Dole is not as committed to the contract as I am, as Newt Gingrich is, certainly not as committed as the House freshmen are," he said.

Dole responded that if Gramm is all that upset, he should "come back here and participate" in working out a solution.

"Senator Gramm has proved himself to be a non-essential federal worker during the budget battle," added Nelson Warfield, Dole's campaign spokesman.

Staff writer Dan Balz in New Hampshire contributed to this report.

THE GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN



BY ROBERT A. REEDER—THE WASHINGTON POST

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