

A Taste of Their Own Medicine

Revenge Fantasies of the Furloughed

By Laura Blumenfeld
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Trains crash through Union Station and pummel the Capitol. Newt Gingrich is ousted and forced to sit at home in his pajamas. A thousand federal prisoners are set loose on the White House lawn. Freshman Republicans dressed in thin cotton socks are bused to reeducation camps in Minnesota, where droning bureaucrats teach them that government is compromise.

Revenge fantasies are sweet. They belong to furloughed federal workers and a lot more are floating around. You might not expect such warped plots to trickle out of the GS mind, but there's never before been a maddening, baffling, impoverishing, numbing 21-day government shutdown for inspiration.

"Let's lock John Kasich in a room for three weeks," says Alan Myers, a communications analyst for the Federal Communications Commission. Myers has cabin fever; how soothing to imagine Kasich (R-Ohio), chairman of the House Budget Committee, getting a dose. "Give him a television set to watch the efforts to release him from his cell. Let him see how he likes it."

A chunk of ham in front of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a Big Mac set before President Clinton—that's how William Chapman would arrange his payback.

"I'd get them real cold and hungry, and have a warm building for them to go into for one minute," says Chapman, a claim representative for Social Security who has been working without pay. Just as Clinton and Gingrich reach for their favorite meals, Chapman says, "take it away and send them into the cold."

Maybe it would teach the politicians a lesson: "I don't believe Newt Gingrich or Bill Clinton has ever been truly cold or hungry or dependent," he says.

Since Dec. 15, nine Cabinet departments and 38 other federal agencies and boards have gone without approved budgets. Employees are not being paid, even those still working. There's not a thing the workers can do about it. Except, maybe—scheme.

At the State Department, the get-even dream is to stiff an entire congressional delegation on a trip abroad: "Sorry, Mr.

See FANTASIES, C12, Col. 1

FANTASIES, From C1

Congressman, but we just don't have anybody available to wipe your wife's nose and arrange your squash game."

At the IRS, workers who were furloughed in November whisper about the thrill of watching lawmakers' bank accounts suddenly go poof. At the Department of Energy, where morale is dead even though the department has a budget, analysts say they'd like to see the entire Congress declared non-essential.

Throw them all out—high on the wish list this week.

John Coughlan, from the IRS, has the new House lined up in his mind: A representative from New York who's a cabdriver, a bricklayer from Maryland, a short-order cook from Michigan. "Maybe then we'd get some down-to-earth bills passed," he says.

"Take away their matching campaign funds," says Diane Coughlin, a health insurance specialist with the Department of Health and Human Services. "The whole reason for the shutdown is because of the election year."

"I'd volunteer for the Ken Starr effort," quips Ed Pechan, referring to the Whitewater independent counsel investigation. Pechan's federal contract was frozen by the furlough. He blames Clinton: "Here's a guy who says he feels people's pain—and he's causing pain."

Wayne Winkler is aiming his ruler at the bad boys of Congress. "Cut their staff," says Winkler, a systems analyst at the Department of Commerce. "If they weren't being paid, we'd have a budget within 12 hours."

The idled employees feel powerless. They feel bored. But ask them to even the score and, suddenly, there's a giggle.

"I'd like to cut their lights," says Eric Talley, a suit-and-tie programmer at the Immigration and Naturalization Service, stuck at home in an old T-shirt and a pair of flip-flops. "Gingrich, Mr. Dole, President Clinton—they'd be sitting there in a room talking back and forth, and we'd give them a scare."

The room would go black! There'd

be a knock at the door!

"Someone asks to pay for the electric bill. Yeah, they'd need one more dollar to get the lights on," Talley says, his voice cheering. "But the federal employees refuse to send their dollar."

Gingrich would beg. Clinton would sweat. But the bureaucrats would shake their heads and say: "*We're trying to balance our checkbooks.*"

Talley chuckles: "They'd be sitting in the dark—like we are."

An eye for an eye. Let them live what we have been living.

"I wish they could all come in for a 16-hour shift," says Phil Glover, a federal prison worker on furlough. Give the congressmen utility belts and black safety-toe shoes. Send them in to check the inmates' toilets for hooch, sift their laundry for knives, conduct strip searches and get splattered with meat loaf at dinner. "Then you come home and get calls from the bank on your car loan," says Glover, who had to defer his own car payments.

"I want Gingrich to be me," says Deborah Hannah, simply. The paralegal specialist at the FCC is sitting in her living room, holding a pad of paper marked with categories: *credit card, phone bill, cable bills, life insurance, rent.*

"I wish he was sitting here on the

couch wondering how he's going to finagle with his bill collectors," Hannah says. Next to her on her desk lies a stack of bills. All the lights are off except for one lamp, to save on electricity.

"He'd be in socks, his hair would be mussed like a raggy mop on his head," she says. The House speaker would wear tattered khaki pants, and his shoes, like her shoes, would be scattered on the floor. His stomach, like her stomach, would be knotted up.

"He had leftover lasagna for lunch and he'd be eating lasagna for the rest of the week, 'cause that's what I'm doing," Hannah says.

The news would be on—clips of the politicians involved in the budget debate. "He would yell at the TV as I do. He'd ask: 'What world are they living in? What planet are they from?'"

He'd look at the screen and wonder at the little men striding about, so cut off from reality.