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1/25/96

Advantage Clinton

A telling moment came near the end of President Clinton's masterful State of the Union address when he harangued the Republican-controlled Congress to "never, ever shut the federal government down again." On the Republican side of the aisle, Sen. Trent Lott turned to Sen. Alfonse D'Amato with a look of smiling exasperation.

"This guy is shameless," Lott remembers saying to D'Amato. "He shut down the government." Even before Tuesday night, Republicans were complaining about public perceptions. Clinton had vetoed appropriations bills, continuing resolutions and a balanced budget. That handed Congress an ultimatum: Yield to me, or close the government. Yet the public blamed Congress, not the president, according to polls. Clinton's address aggravated GOP frustration. While he adopted conservative rhetoric in proclaiming that "the era of big government is over," all his proposals involve government action. After 55 hours of stonewalling in meetings with GOP leaders, he pleaded with Republicans to return to the table. After vetoing two welfare reform proposals, he called for a bipartisan plan.

He also continued his habit of interspersing calls for reconciliation with viciously partisan assaults, such as this bitter indictment of the Republican Congress: "Lobbyists for the polluters have been allowed to write their own loopholes into bills, to weaken laws that protect health and safety of our children." The pain on the face of conscientious Republican Sen. Pete Domenici, certainly not pro-polluter, was palpable.

When previewed Monday to some of us columnists by White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta, the president's speech sounded like a

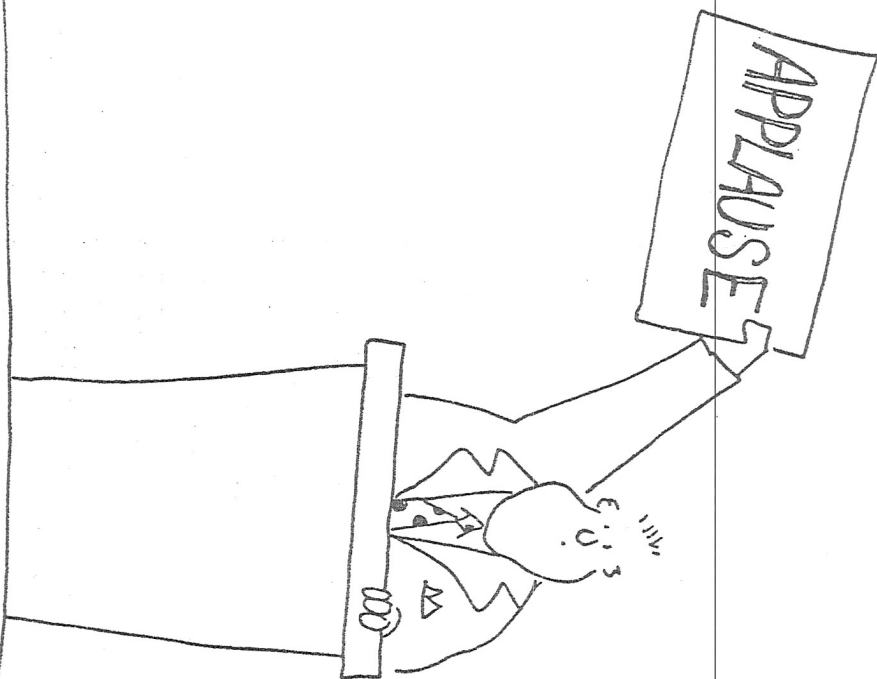
policy wonk's dream. Its multiple provisions suggest compulsively intrusive government, seeking to control content of television programs and mandate uniforms for children in public schools. Clintonian gimmickry is seen in his proposed \$1,000 scholarship for good students and denial of federal contracts to companies that hire illegal immigrants.

This laundry list of disconnected proposals was turned into an effective speech by Clinton's delivery and staging. He followed Ronald Reagan's precedent in stacking the galleries with heroic figures and celebrating patriotism and service.

It is never easy for the opposition party to answer an effective State of the Union address (as Tuesday night's was and as Clinton's 1994 and 1995 efforts were not). As the front-runner for his party's presidential nomination, Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole should not have taken on this impossible assignment but instead should have passed it on to somebody else. But he insisted, and nobody dared tell him not to.

In comparison to Clinton's easy-flowing oratory, Dole looked old, tired and wooden. His supporters blame the Teleprompter operator, but that was not his only problem. Colleagues pleaded with him to respond before an audience, outdoors or perhaps on the House floor after the president left. For a brief moment, Dole was going to speak from his hometown of Russell, Kan. That was discarded in favor of a sterile, nondescript office environment.

Staging aside, Dole's 10-minute speech was much better written than the president's hour-long ramble, which showed tell-tale touches of Clinton's own pen. But Dole's harsh rejection of elitism, liberalism and the welfare state could have been written in 1936 rather than 1996.



BY T. GIBSON

Dole is not the most effective apostle of the Republican Revolution. But even that movement's great visionary, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, was not at his best Wednesday morning. Instead of painting a bright and shining future, Gingrich underlined the need for the president to reduce entitlements and proposed melding the debt ceiling bill with spending cuts agreed to by Clinton—nothing to stir the heart.

The reason neither Dole nor Gingrich could effectively answer Clinton is that the State of the Union follows a bad five months for the

GOP after the brilliant start in 1995. Republican leaders made the error of underestimating Clinton's willingness to shut down government and default on the debt rather than yield, as well as his ability to sell his message to the public.

The Republicans know what kind of government they want, even more clearly than Clinton does. But today, they lack creative means of getting there, and that is an immense advantage for the president.