

Dick Arme y, Stepping Ahead to Lead

'Yes' or 'No' Conservative Learns to Say 'Maybe'—Even to Moderates

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Dick Arme y loves free markets, the balanced budget and the flat tax. He hates farm subsidies, the Commerce Department and the minimum wage. He's not shy about saying what he thinks, and he doesn't play to the crowd.

"You gotta understand," he told a group of high school honor students from Florida who asked him about the future of federal education grants during a recent visit to the Capitol. "I'm not a big fan of the federal government."

Two months have passed since House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), whose national popularity was sinking out of sight, "stepped back" from the day-to-day legislative grind to raise money for GOP House candidates and coordinate reelection strategy with Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-

Kan.), the party's presumptive presidential nominee.

In Gingrich's absence, House Majority Leader Richard K. Arme y (R-Tex.) has stepped forward, bringing with him an impeccable reputation as a red-meat conservative with rough edges, who, even in his current job, often serves as the leadership's ideological last line of defense. This is perhaps both his greatest strength and his weakness.

Arme y's suggestion Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press" that the government cut education spending to fund the repeal of a 4.3 cents-per-gallon gasoline tax prompted immediate cries of outrage from the Clinton administration.

But inside the House, Arme y wins respect for having the courage of his convictions and the willingness to state them. Both his friends and his enemies agree that he doesn't lie, doesn't take cheap shots and

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doesn't stab colleagues in the back. With Arme y, what you see is what you get.

"The speaker thinks laterally rather than vertically . . . it's a really creative way to problem-solve," said freshman Rep. Mark Edward Souder (R-Ind.). "But it's an illusory style. He's never pinned down, and you often wonder what's going on."

With Arme y, the microeconomist from Texas, this is never a problem. "He's much more straightforward," Souder said. "And if you're in a straightforward group like the freshmen, you're much more comfortable with that."

But now Arme y is being asked to do more. Now it is Arme y who takes the beating from Democrats on the minimum wage, who urges President Clinton to sign Congress's bills on health care, product liability and missile defense. It is Arme y who chastises the president for his threatened vetoes.

And it is Arme y who must smother his own agenda to enlist help from GOP moderates whose support he must have to pass bills. He is a "yes" or "no" person now called upon to say "maybe," and to do it diplomatically.

Over the past two weeks, his colleagues have seen both sides. At a recent House leadership meeting, it was Arme y who blew the whistle when Gingrich was about ready to allow a floor vote to raise the minimum wage. Democrats were giving Republicans a fearful beating on a popular issue, and the GOP was thinking about cutting its losses, taking the defeat and moving on.

Not this way, counseled Arme y. Raising

the wage is anathema to conservatives, he said. Instead of rolling over now, wait a while and craft an alternative proposal that creates jobs and increases take-home pay. It was "a very forceful argument," said one leadership source who described the meeting, and it carried the day.

Saying "no" was vintage Arme y, faithful to his belief that "you should never do the wrong thing to reward your enemies." It was also music to conservative ears, the kind of hard-headedness that made him the man the freshmen wanted in the room with Clinton during last year's budget battles.

And saying no also was a "defining moment" for a GOP still stunned by its defeats at Clinton's hands, according to David Mason, vice president of the conservative Heritage Foundation and longtime Arme y ally. "They [the Republicans] lost on the budget, and they're trying to get back in the fight," Mason said. "If they had given up on the minimum wage, they would have been in full rout. You've almost got to give Arme y the credit all alone."

But although Arme y may have stopped a GOP retreat, a week later he was worried that his harshness had alienated moderate supporters of the minimum wage who were reluctant to fall on their swords during a tough election year.

"It's all well and good for me to talk about the minimum wage as a 'cruel hoax,' " he said before a Republican conference meeting. "But there are guys who are saying, 'There's Arme y standing high and dry on the river bank,



FILE PHOTO/ BY JAMES A. PARCELL—THE WASHINGTON POST
House Speaker Newt Gingrich, flanked by Majority Whip Tom DeLay, left, and Majority Leader Richard K. Arme in December. In Gingrich's recent absence, Arme has stepped forward.

and while I'm drowning, he's telling me that I'll learn to swim eventually."

Cold comfort, and during the conference a few hours later, he acknowledged as much. Stay with us, he told his colleagues, and there will be a floor vote that will address the needs of society's poor working families.

And even though "I believe in my soul" that raising the minimum wage is a bad idea, it may be there "in some form," said one leadership source, quoting Arme. On that day, the source said, the moderates "saw him at his best."

For conservatives, dealing with Arme can be a relief, especially after the budget debacle. Freshman Rep. Charles Joseph Scarborough (R-Fla.), an ardent crusader, said Gingrich "could have been tougher" in the budget negotiations and suggested that the current popular wisdom—that Gingrich is somehow a "moderate" and Arme a true conservative—"is not inaccurate."

Arme blamed the budget crisis for briefly blurring the division of labor between him and Gingrich, worked out at the beginning of this Congress and abandoned late last year during the budget meltdown when "everybody was doing everything."

Now, Arme said, the leadership as a whole, not Gingrich, has gone back "to the model we had." Gingrich, he said, is the outside man—a better fund-raiser and a "good visionary" who "gives great speeches."

Arme is the inside man. "I have had more of a penchant for legislation," he said. "I can do the politics, but I don't like it. I'm much more comfortable in this role of managing the House."

He noted that while Gingrich took on the job of proselytizing for the "Contract With America" and organizing the GOP's new majority enthusiasm, it was Arme who put together the bills that brought the contract to the House floor.

And while more of the limelight is falling on him now, Arme maintains this has occurred more by default than by design, an assess-

ment shared by much of the GOP caucus. "Gingrich has been in and out," Souder said. "Arme has been mostly the same."

And Souder, like many of his colleagues, expects that Gingrich will reassert himself when the time is right. Gingrich remains the GOP's main man, and "has to engage publicly, because we have no one else."

Now 55, Arme is a tall, solid-looking man with a 1950s haircut, a PhD in economics from the University of Oklahoma and a good ol' boy Dallas drawl that has all but erased his roots in small-town North Dakota.

Today he sports a pair of cowboy boots with the seal of the House of Representatives on them and uses an office computer with a screen saver photograph of Dick Arme kissing a bass. He is loaded with folksy good humor and an endless stream of one-line aphorisms culled mostly from country music lyrics.

But even at the beginning of his House career 12 years ago, most of this fooled nobody. "From the moment he arrived, he was marked out as a fast burner and a true believer motivated by ideas," said Heritage's Mason.

Some of Arme's ideas caught on. In 1988, he scored a major tour de force from the minority back bench when his proposal for an independent commission to shut down obsolete military bases was signed into law.

Other ideas have not fared as well. Since the late 1980s, he has waged a crusade to get rid of farm subsidy programs, first drawing attention and fire in 1990 with an article he wrote for the Heritage Foundation entitled "Moscow on the Mississippi."

This year, Congress enacted a major simplification of farm programs, but many of Arme's favorite whipping boys, like sugar and peanut subsidies, survived almost intact.

In this case, Souder said, Arme was following another Arme aphorism—"Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good"—but Souder and others caution that compromise

posing viewpoints.

"When you talk to Dick Arme you know what he believes, and where he stands," Souder said. "His approach is to apply those beliefs, and within those confines to find 218 votes." If he can't find them, pragmatism will cause him to moderate his position, but, colleagues say, this doesn't mean he's changed his mind.

"He's easy to work with, but he's narrow," agreed Rep. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.), a Brooklyn liberal who worked with Arme for years to cut farm programs. "He doesn't really try to see the other person's viewpoint, but when you disagree, he'll let you know."

It troubles Arme that his plainspoken conservatism can come across as mean-spirited or evil-tempered, as it did on "Meet the Press." Yes, he acknowledged, "I have said 'confrontation is a tool,'" but "I don't do anger—in my whole career here I cannot recall a time when I was angry."

Still, it is apparently no picnic to cross him on something he cares about. Souder and Rep. John Barden Shadegg (R-Ariz.) recall trying to circulate a letter in early 1995 urging colleagues to oppose the balanced budget amendment unless it included a provision requiring a three-fifths House "supermajority" to raise taxes.

"The leadership doesn't mind letters as long as they don't have the words 'I will not vote for' in them," Souder said. "They were getting heartburn." Shadegg and Souder were sent individually to Arme's office for serious discussion.

"Basically I was taken to the woodshed," Shadegg recalled. "Arme said, 'You can't do this.' I said we were going to do it. An hour later, we were going round and round. . . . It was fairly aggressive." Souder reported the same experience. "I understood we were on the same page philosophically," Souder said. "But he was arguing that bringing down the balanced budget would bring us all down."

Chastened but unconvinced, Souder went back to the floor, only to be grabbed by Gingrich. Vote for the balanced budget now, Gingrich said, and we'll give you a vote on the supermajority next year on tax day.

Souder agreed; the balanced budget amendment passed the House; and a supermajority amendment was voted on and rejected this past April 15. "When you look back, you could see a lot of the variables," Souder said. Arme softened them up, "and that made us more amenable to a deal. But it was Gingrich who stepped in to do the deal."

Now, however, Gingrich is not always available as the court of last resort, and Arme has to act as his own referee. He says, "My wife tells me I have a tendency toward conflict avoidance." Others note that conflict is what got him to the pinnacle.

"He didn't strike me as a leadership type, because he said what he thought too much, and he didn't go out of his way to reach beyond his own viewpoint," Schumer said. "I'm surprised he's majority leader, but in this Congress he fits."