

Conciliation Supersedes Revolution

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GOP Attempts To Appease Voters

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The Republican-controlled 104th Congress opened in January 1995 with talk of orphanages for neglected children and votes to cut spending for school lunches, all in the cause of reversing a half-century of Democratic-inspired governmental growth. Now it is winding up by pumping more money into education and expanding the government's reach—even into the maternity ward—in what amounts to a belated concession to the realities of American politics.

As Congress struggled to wrap up its work by Monday after reaching a compromise on immigration legislation and a huge spending bill for next year, Republicans beamed a clear message to voters: The revolution has to wait.

"The feeling was: Get things done, retain the majority and then be able to do more," said Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.). "If we don't compromise, we risk losing everything."

In a remarkable political pirouette, the Congress that promised a revolutionary assault on government-as-we-know-it settled for what its leaders modestly describe as "common sense" solutions to everyday problems, such as stopping insurance companies from forcing new mothers out of hospitals within 24 hours of their babies' delivery.

Republican lawmakers set aside more ambitious and contentious goals in the interest of achieving tangible

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results, avoiding the "do-nothing" label Democrats were eager to pin on them and getting out of Washington as soon as possible to explain to skeptical voters what they have been trying to do.

Republicans claimed they did all they could, or at least all that President Clinton and a nay-saying Democratic minority would let them do, including most of the "Contract With America" that House Republicans promised in their campaigns two years ago.

While Republicans enacted much of the Contract, from welfare reform to anti-crime measures, they lost some of its highest profile items, including a major tax cut—the "crown jewel" of the contract—and constitutional amendments to balance the budget and impose term limits on members of Congress. Their hopes of stemming the cost of huge benefit programs such as Medicare and Medicaid were dashed in the collapse of their 1995 budget. "We did not get everything we wanted, but we got a great deal," House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) said.

Democrats retorted that Republicans were so damaged by their excesses, especially the fight over Medicare and two government shutdowns that resulted from their 1995 budget battles with Clinton, they had no choice but to turn to Democrats for help in fashioning bipartisan achievements this year. They shot themselves in "one foot, two feet, one hand, two hands" and are now all but "dancing the Macarena," said Senate Minority Leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.), referring to the dance performed frequently at the Democratic National Convention last month.

Just as Clinton was chastened by rejection of his huge health care plan and the subsequent GOP takeover of Congress in 1994, Republicans were forced to drop most of their more grandiose plans when a public backlash against their confrontational tactics not only helped revive Clinton but threatened their reelection.

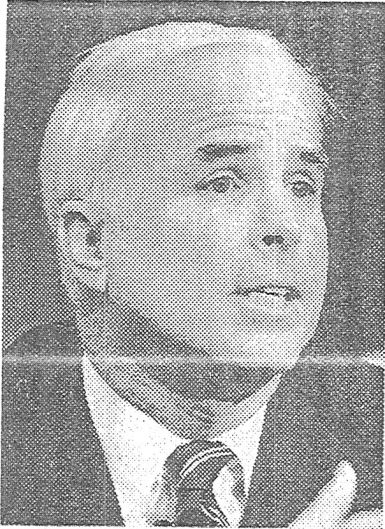
Republicans had to "begin to move the ball down the field with first downs, rather than throwing a 'Hail Mary' pass," Rep. Bill Archer (R-Tex.) said. If they were going to pick fights with the White House, it would be fights "that we could win," said House Republican Conference Chairman John A. Boehner (R-Ohio).

Like Clinton, Republicans have pursued a small-bites approach to governance that appears to have improved their image with voters. "They changed [their image] by early summer by enacting bills that are popular instead of trying to use them as clubs to beat up on Clinton," said Gary C. Jacobson, a political scientist at the University of California in San Diego.

By midsummer, they were churning out bills that affect Americans' daily lives, from the purity of the food they eat and the water they drink to the safety of the airplanes they fly. Gone were the more provocative initiatives that enabled Democrats to portray Republicans as anti-environment, anti-education, anti-elderly and anti-just about everything else. Above all, there were no more votes to cut school lunches.

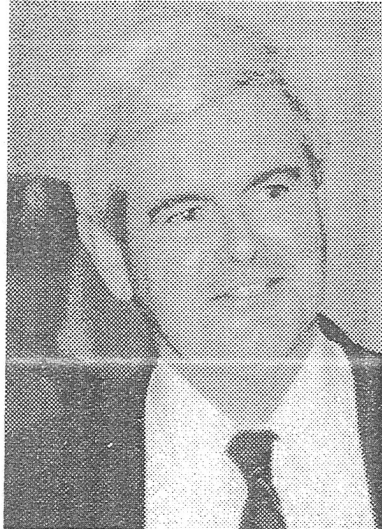
The result was a solid record of legislative accomplishment—"certainly above average," in the assessment of Thomas E. Mann, director of governmental studies for the Brookings Institution.

"If we were to judge this Congress in terms of its announced objectives at the beginning, it would be seen largely as a failure," Mann said. "But if it is judged by its productivity in historical terms, not just the number of



FILE PHOTO

SEN. JOHN MCCAIN
... "There has been a seismic shift"



FILE PHOTO

REP. NEWT GINGRICH
... said GOP had to aim high



FILE PHOTO

SEN. THOMAS A. DASCHLE
... wants to modify new welfare law

bills but their scope, it would clearly rank among the more productive congresses."

Until only a few months ago, "it was shaping up as a remarkably unproductive Congress," he added. "Then, in the weeks preceding the conventions, facing the prospect of their electoral demise, they shifted gears and proceeded to act as legislative bodies are expected to act, with good-faith negotiations and compromise."

House leaders defied complaints from freshmen and other conservatives by tacking onto a more pragmatic course. Just as important, Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.) took over in mid-June as Senate majority leader when Robert

J. Dole quit to campaign full time for the presidency, eliminating Dole as a target for Democratic obstructionism and setting a "just-get-it-done" commandment for the Senate.

Some of the accomplishments, such as the bill to overhaul the welfare system that Clinton signed with some reluctance this summer, flow out of the barricade-storming zeal that marked the 104th's first year. The welfare bill overturns a legacy of the New Deal, ends the federal guarantee of cash assistance for the poor and transfers responsibility, power and resources to states, in line with the overarching goals Republicans set in early 1995.

But other accomplishments sound as though they came straight out of the Democrats' song book.

To avoid being called anti-education and to escape another suicidal budget showdown with Clinton, Republicans yielded to his demands for \$6.5 billion more for schools and other popular domestic initiatives during the fiscal year that starts Tuesday.

Under prodding from Democrats and GOP moderates, they agreed to several health care proposals, which, along with the new maternity care rules, would expand access to coverage for people who are mentally ill, suffer from preexisting conditions or lose their jobs.

In a victory for Democrats that would have been unthinkable last year, Congress passed Clinton's bill to raise the hourly minimum wage from \$4.25 to \$5.15 over the next year—the first increase since 1989.

Some of the most important legislation was the product of years of bipartisan effort, including overhaul of telecommunications laws, food safety rules and drinking water standards. New reporting and disclosure rules for lobbyists and constraints on gifts to lawmakers were proposed by Democrats and blocked by Republicans until they took control of Congress. And a line-item veto, empowering the president to kill individual items out of spending bills, was pushed by Clinton as well as Republicans.

But Republicans can justifiably claim that many of the bipartisan initiatives—along with the GOP-drafted overhaul of the farm subsidy system—embody core Republican goals, such as reducing federal costs and providing more flexibility for businesses and other levels of government. They also overhauled the operations of Congress in a way that only a new crowd could do.

Even more significantly, Republicans have shifted the whole debate to the right, tilting the federal system's balance of power toward the states, putting tax cuts ahead of tax increases and forcing a reexamination of regulations and their impact. Although Republicans lost the political wars over the budget, they succeeded in cutting spending by \$53 billion over two years and bludgeoned Clinton to accept the concept of reaching a balanced budget within seven years. When he proclaimed in his State of the Union message last January that "the era

of big government is over," Clinton was singing the Republicans' song.

"The debate is not about how much more we spend; it's about how much less. It is not about how much more taxes but how much less . . . not how much more regulation but how much less," McCain said. "There is no doubt that there has been a seismic shift in the direction of Congress." But, as McCain acknowledged, there is a question of whether Republicans pushed "too far, too fast," tripping themselves up by overreaching.

Even House Budget Committee Chairman John R. Kasich (R-Ohio), chief architect of the Republicans' massive 1995 budget and tax plan, now believes Congress should try to carve out a "bite-sized chunk," as it did with the welfare and health initiatives, to avoid gagging on a whole mouthful of contentious issues, as it did on the budget. "There were so many things loaded up in there that it really became almost a blur," he said.

But Gingrich argues Republicans had to aim high to get what they got. "Could we have gotten [this far] with a lower profile, less energetic, less aggressive, less far-reaching effort? I don't know. But I think you needed the energy and the momentum and the excitement to really force the debate," he said.

While Democrats denounce what they describe as the "extremism" of the GOP agenda, their leaders have only a short list of things they would undo. Daschle and House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.) said they would modify the new welfare law to help states put people to work and ease its impact on immigrants. Gephardt also talked about assuring the minimum wage keeps pace with inflation.

Not all Republicans were happy with the result. While moderates such as retiring Sen. Mark O. Hatfield (R-Ore.) hailed the end-of-session bipartisan tone, others, such as conservative Sen. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.) expressed dismay that Clinton won his way on so many spending issues. Asked if he heard complaints about GOP concessions, Lott said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. There is concern . . . especially when there seems to be no end to it."

Where does it go from here? Republicans are hoping the Nov. 5 elections will revive the revolution. "Just imagine what we will do with Bob Dole as president," House Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) told a pep rally on the Capitol steps Friday. That is precisely the Democrats' nightmare. Even if they lose the White House but return to power on Capitol Hill, "they'll do more harm," Gephardt complained.

Mann suggested that this Congress, in its final days, set the tone for the future. "What the public said was that we don't want more government but we want what government we have," he said.

Staff writer John E. Yang contributed to this report.