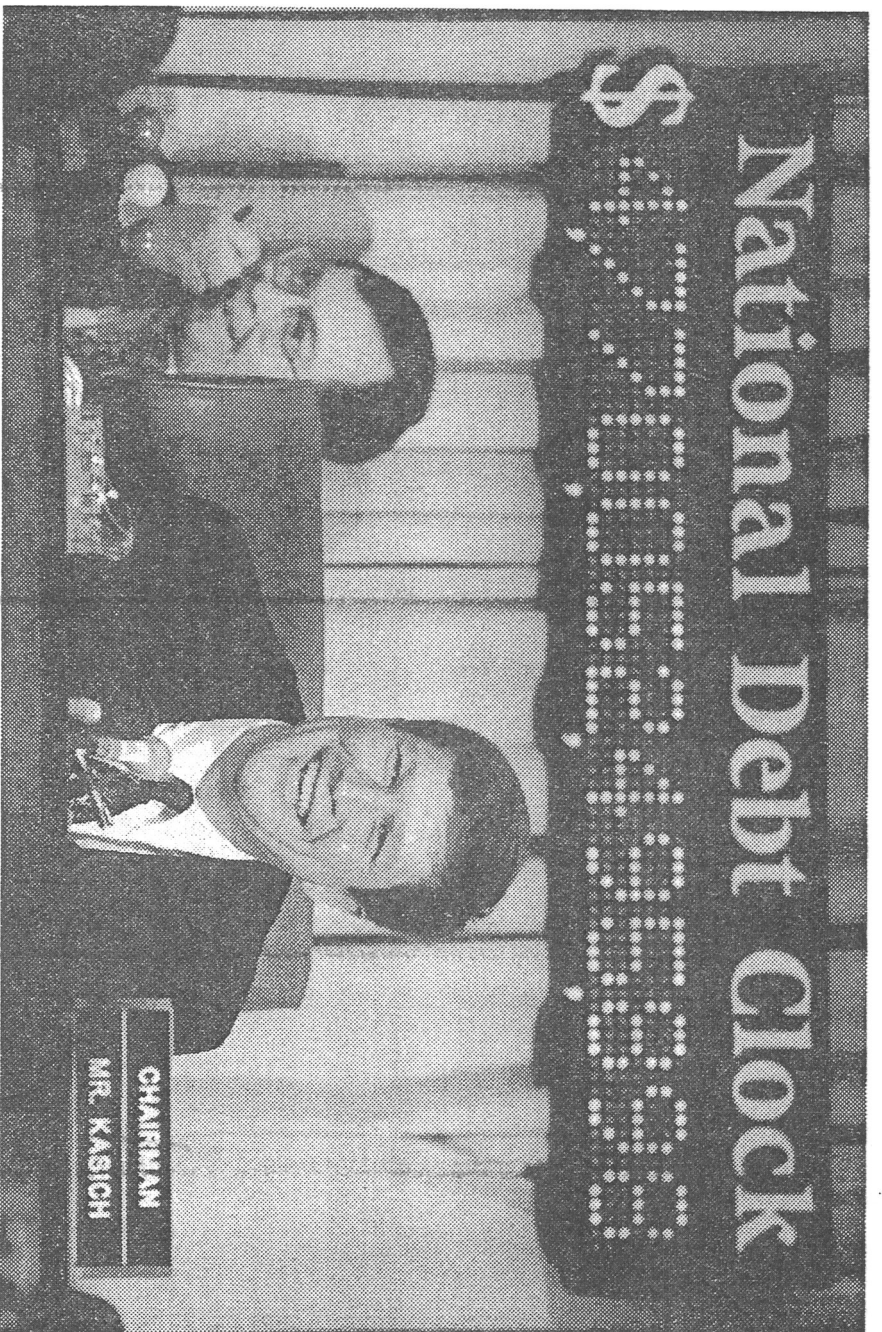


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Man of the hour:
Colleagues conclude that Rep. John R. Kasich's relentless nature aids his obsessive pursuit of a balanced budget.



BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST

An Irresistible Force Tackles an Immovable Object

By Michael Weiskopf and David Maraniss
Washington Post Staff Writers

The abiding obsession of John Richard Kasich grew ever more intense this year until it finally seeped into his subconscious. He began dreaming about the federal budget. His budget dreams were invariably ugly, he said. When he fell asleep his restless mind encountered the same nocturnal furries—fellow members of Congress who appeared before him red-faced and screaming: "How could you do this to us! We didn't know about this!"

As chairman of the House Budget Committee, which yesterday began the historic but precarious task of slashing programs to balance the federal books by the year 2002, Kasich's confronta-

tions, real and imagined, might now get nastier. He has reached the critical moment of his congressional career, a time when his obsession, his dreams and the fate of his party have become inextricably linked. How he handles the pressure—whether he lives up to his reputation as an

INSIDE THE REVOLUTION THE BUDGET BROKER

honest broker willing to take on turf-conscious colleagues and special interests traditionally aligned with the GOP—could define the Republican revolution far more than the "Contract With America" of the first 100 days.

Kasich is so central to the budget enterprise that many observers consider his position equal to that of his older and better known superiors, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and Majority Leader Richard K. Arney (R-Tex.). "I consider John the key man of the whole first session," said Republican former congressman Bill Frenzel (Minn.), a deficit hawk who served as one of Kasich's mentors. "Some Republicans will say we need to protect traditional Republican constituents, and therefore there are some things they don't want cut. That's where John does a good job. He doesn't want to protect anything."

It was with a brassy show of confidence that See KASICH, A14, Col. 1

Kasich opened the budget deliberations yesterday. He alternately played the role of television game show host and earnest statesman. After gaveling his committee to order at 10:06 a.m., he bounded from his high-backed chair and unveiled a National Debt Clock on the wall behind him, a digital contraption that blinked every second to add another \$9,386 to the \$4.7 trillion meter. Then he bragged about his Elvis Presley tie and compared the rarity of a balanced budget—a “zero sighting” he called it—to the infrequency of Elvis sightings. Soon he was more somber, evoking the stately ambiance of the committee room, with its pale green walls and oil portraits and brass chandeliers, as he declared that he and his Republican committee colleagues had united behind a “bold, innovative and revolutionary” document that would erase the annual budget deficit in seven years.

But behind his assertive exterior, Kasich was battling the same anxieties that haunted his dreams. He thought of the budget document as a painting, he had explained in a private moment—“And you just kind of say, this is a great painting, and you know they’re going to take it and smash it and run over it with their car.” The painting smashers in Kasich’s image were not just Democrats, but some fellow Republicans upset with his handling of issues ranging from highway funds to military pensions.

The budget of the United States and Chairman Kasich might seem the unlikelyst of pairs, the immobile financial behemoth embraced by the wiry and fidgety politician.

Kasich, at 42, remains constitutionally incapable of keeping still, the antithesis of the placid bean-counter. “Whenever I see him, I’d like to give him a shot of Ritalin,” a drug for hyperactivity, said Alan Krawnowitz, a friend and business lobbyist. “He wears me out.” At a news conference with Gingrich and Armey the other day, he kept bobbing and weaving in and out of camera range, never once calming down for a motionless moment. His eyes blinked like a hummingbird’s wings; 36 times in a minute, a time span when the more inert Armey blinked twice. He radiates so much energy that colleagues in the Ohio delegation, weary and looking for sleep, dread the thought of getting seated near him on flights back to the Midwest.

His detractors in Congress find Kasich’s personality traits more tiresome than winning. They characterize him as an argumentative and self-righteous whirligig, a bachelor who devotes all his time and energy on cutting the government, finding pleasure in an act that can

bring pain to others. Kasich mocks the notion that his proposed cuts bring pain. “Let’s talk about job training programs,” Kasich said in making his point. “Am I going to say, okay, I just lost my job, but, honey, we don’t have to worry about it because I just got myself a slot in the federal job training program? Are you kidding? So if we’re going to cut federal job programs back we’re going to have *pain?*”

Yet though Kasich’s friends and colleagues find him exhausting, they have concluded that his relentless nature aids his obsessive pursuit of a balanced budget. Last winter, as Kasich was making the first preparations for the budget battle, pollster Frank Luntz went back to Columbus, Ohio, with him and conducted a focus group session at which Luntz asked 13 citizens how they felt about the national deficit and how they would react to various budget cuts. Kasich sat on the other side of a one-way mirror and watched.

A few minutes into the session, Luntz began receiving scraps of paper sent in by Kasich with new questions for the respondents. The notes came faster and faster, more and more pointed, until Luntz had a stack on his lap and only a few minutes left in the two-hour session.

“He wanted to know what’s driving people, how can he address it.” Luntz recalled. “I’d ask a question, and he’d tell me to ask it a different way or push harder. There were close to two dozen notes.”

Luntz said he has had members of Congress fall asleep during focus groups; only with Kasich, Luntz added half-jokingly, did he wish the lawmaker had taken a Valium.

The Mailman’s Son

Kasich likes to say that he is from “the Rocks,” slang for McKees Rocks, Pa., a blue-collar suburb on the western rim of Pittsburgh. It is a poetic place to be from, for a Republican who views himself as a populist and wants to distance himself from his party’s old country club image. In fact, he grew up in the town next door, Stowe Township, which is like McKees Rocks in every way except that its name sounds more leafy suburban.

His roots were far from the country club nonetheless. His Croatian grandfather was a steelworker and his father was the town mailman who drove his car to the post office every morning, gathered the letter bag, drove back home to the two-story brick house on Elizabeth Street, and walked the same daily route, befriending nearly everyone. John Kasich’s energy and gregariousness came from his father, who was killed along with his mother in a traffic accident in 1987: they were pulling out of a Dairy Queen and got blindsided.

His persistence came from trying to compete on the dusty playing field at Fen-



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—FORMER REPRESENTATIVE BILL FRENZEL
ON REP. JOHN R. KASICH (R-OHIO), ABOVE

ton School as a scrawny little boy. “As a smaller guy I always had to give it everything,” Kasich said. The first reward for his persistence came late one fall evening in 1960, when he was eight and his mother drove him downtown for the celebration when the Pittsburgh Pirates won the World Series. Antsy little Kasich weaved his way through the crowd to get his baseball autographed by Bill Mazerowski, whose home run beat the Yankees.

Although his parents were Democrats, as were nine out of 10 residents of his hometown, Kasich became a Republican at Ohio State University. He says it was the classic expression of campus bureaucracy—the registration line—that made him turn. “I became a Republican because I don’t like hassles. I don’t like orders, bureaucracy, rules, red tape, mazes or anything else.”

The second reward for his persistence came during his university days, when he got riled by a rule that made all the boys in his dorm, even those not responsible for it, pay a share of the cost for a broken window. He spent three weeks demanding to get in to see the Ohio State president, Novice Fawcett. When he finally got his visitation, Fawcett mentioned that he was going to see President Richard M. Nixon later that week. Kasich asked if he could come along. No, Fawcett said. How

about taking a letter to the president for me? Kasich asked. The administrator relented. The letter so impressed Nixon that Kasich soon got a White House invitation of his own.

The Obsession

Budget cuts were always Kasich’s political cause, going back long before his rise in Congress to his time as an aide and later a senator in the Ohio legislature. Bob Blair, a colleague from the Ohio days, remembered Kasich’s usual reaction when the two young aides would walk through the state administrative buildings. “We would go into these state agencies and see hundreds of people sitting around, and John would ask, ‘What are they doing? What are they working on?’ ”

As a junior member of the Ohio legislature, Kasich began a tradition he would take with him to Washington: drafting detailed budgets as alternatives to administration proposals. “He was always provocative back then,” said Curt Steiner, an officer in the Ohio Senate. “He is the kind of person who could get excited about budgets, which a lot of people can’t.”

After his election to the U.S. House in 1982—another reward for persistence in a year when few other Republican challengers succeeded—Kasich’s eternal restlessness did not sit well with some veterans in his party. He became known as somewhat of a lone wolf, better at challenging authority than at negotiating. Until his ascension to the Budget Committee chairmanship this January, his most notable efforts at coalition building over the last decade involved alliances with Democrats, first, as a member of the House Armed Services Committee, when he joined forces with Democratic Chairman Ronald V. Dellums (Calif.) to derail the B-2 bomber program, and later when he teamed with a maverick Democrat, Timothy J. Penny (Minn.), on a deficit reduction plan.

Penny came to think that Kasich shared not only a desire to cut the budget but also a belief that the budget was more than a million lines of type. It was one big idea, they concluded, and focusing on it was far more worthwhile than developing an expertise in a narrow congressional field, as some of their elders instructed them to do.

Penny came to think of his unlikely sidekick as a tempestuous little brother. “He can get frustrated at times, but he vents and gets it out of his system,” Penny said. If he ran up against a roadblock, he would say, “We’re dead in the water! What are we going to do?” A defeatist emotion would come through for a half hour, and then he would get it out. It was a hoot.”

Kasich has similar relationships with Gingrich and Armey. At the leadership news conference last weekend, every time Kasich finished answering a ques-

tion, Arney would smile, shake his head, place an oversized hand on Kasich's shoulder and pat him like he was patting a little brother who had just won a neighborhood fight. Sometimes the pats are not so loving.

One came earlier this year when Kasich, in his role as a military reformer, voted to reject a commitment to deploy a "Star Wars"-like antimissile defense system favored by Republican defense hawks. Arney thought Kasich had made a political mistake and told him so: the vote, he said, might hurt the budget chairman's standing with defense hawks later during budget deliberations.

His relationship with Gingrich is closer but more volatile. He enjoys making fun of the speaker's third wave vocabulary. "I became, to use Newt's word, a facilitator, I *unlocked* people," Kasich said sarcastically in a recent interview, describing the role he played as mediator in a dispute between Gingrich and freshman Mark W. Neumann (R-Wis.), who had bucked the leadership in a key defense vote in the Appropriations Committee. "Power does not intimidate me," Kasich said.

The Dusty Schoolyard

He has only a brief window of opportunity, Kasich said on the eve of the budget deliberations, to turn that horizontal string of digits into zeroes. His colleagues, including Gingrich, keep warning him that his mission now will be harder than anything he has ever tried. Before, when Republicans were in the minority and presenting alternative budgets that had no chance of passage, all they needed was a strong kayak to shoot the rapids of public opinion, Gingrich warned Kasich in a memo. Now they need something more durable, a submarine that can survive the incessant attacks that will be coming on the floor and in conference.

To Kasich, the situation he now confronts is less a mission impossible; it reminds him of his boyhood days on the Fenton schoolyard. "We got up there at nine in the morning, and we'd have 18 guys show up and we played baseball all day, and when we would get done, you would be so dry, you go to the garden hose, and that water would touch your mouth and it was a little bit of heaven. Back then we were all very enthusiastic about playing. We played hard, we played fair. And as a smaller guy, I had to give it everything. And that's where my arguing came from, never giving up on an argument.

"Because let me tell you, when you thought the ball was out, and they thought the ball was fair, and this was the bottom of the seventh inning and you're gonna lose the game, and you've been playing this game for hours, you don't give in."