

Robert D. Novak

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Two-Man Roadblock

Senate disarray in the Republican-controlled Congress, compared with House discipline, is typified by extraordinary performances last week from two committee chairmen: Sen. Pete Domenici, Budget Committee, and Sen. Orrin Hatch, Judiciary Committee.

Each stubbornly took positions antithetical to the wishes of his party's leadership and most of his colleagues. Domenici, in proposing a budget balanced by 2002, refused to include any tax reduction. Hatch, in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, balked at conducting hearings on the excesses of federal law enforcement officers.

Each is in the tradition of Senate grandees, self-assured and answering to no higher authority than his own conscience. But both also display a nasty edge.

Domenici's conduct in omitting any tax cut from his budget would be unthinkable in Speaker Newt Gingrich's House and unlikely in the Senate of previous years. Tax reduction is the heart of Republican ideology and was explicitly promised in the 1994 campaign. Domenici's friend and ally, Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole, has declared that the budget must include tax cuts.

But during his first hitch as Budget chairman in 1981, Domenici was dragged—kicking and screaming—to support the Reagan tax cuts. Without a Republican in the White House, there is nobody to pull him along. His tax-cut phobia has earned praise (on this, if nothing else) from the Democratic Party general chairman, Sen. Christopher Dodd. Domenici has

made life for Dole incomparably more difficult, forcing him to figure out how to insert tax cuts in the final budget version.

In explanation, Domenici is described by one senior Republican senator as "an arrogant man who knows a lot and thinks he knows more than the rest of us." Domenici is hostile to his committee's preeminent tax cutter, Sen. Phil Gramm. Finally, he is viewed by conservative colleagues as a crypto-liberal when it comes to government welfare programs earmarked for his home state of New Mexico.

Hatch's performance was even more inimical to the Senate Republican consensus. He has held back on hearings about multiple deaths at the hands of federal law enforcement officers in Waco, Tex., and Ruby Ridge,

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Idaho, even though Dole and most of his colleagues want them. When Sen. Arlen Specter disclosed plans to hold hearings by his own subcommittee, of Hatch's Judiciary Committee, the full committee chairman resisted in a letter that could have been written by the Democrats who blocked any Waco-Ruby Ridge inquiry during the preceding Congress.

Hearings now, said Hatch, "could inappropriately, albeit unintentionally, convey the wrong message regarding

the culpability of those responsible for the atrocity in Oklahoma City."

That triggered an exchange of correspondence seldom seen between two senators of the same party. When Specter insisted that the hearings are "long overdue," Hatch responded that "your hurried plan . . . will only further erode public confidence in government by reinforcing the stereotype that members of Congress are merely shortsighted political opportunists."

The two senators met on a largely deserted Senate floor last Wednesday, and Hatch provided a new reason for not investigating the FBI: "I am very concerned about us pulling any FBI leader off the Oklahoma City case until they wrap up the investigation." He cited, and praised, Larry Potts, who was named deputy FBI director after being censured for the deadly assault on white separatist Randy Weaver's cabin at Ruby Ridge.

Following its protocol, the Senate voted to support Chairman Hatch. Nevertheless, his motives are much discussed in Republican circles.

Nobody has a clear answer why he refuses to criticize the Potts promotion and echoes the Clintonian rhetoric about respect for government. But when Specter in their bitter exchange of letters wrote, "It is especially surprising to see you of all people refer to 'political opportunist[s]';" there were knowing nods in the cloakroom.

Hatch is not the true-blue conservative who arrived at the Capitol in 1977, and that is an argument for the congressional term limits he opposes. The biggest evil may be the anachronism of seniority, freezing as committee chairmen the Senate grandees who do not understand what the people said Nov. 8.