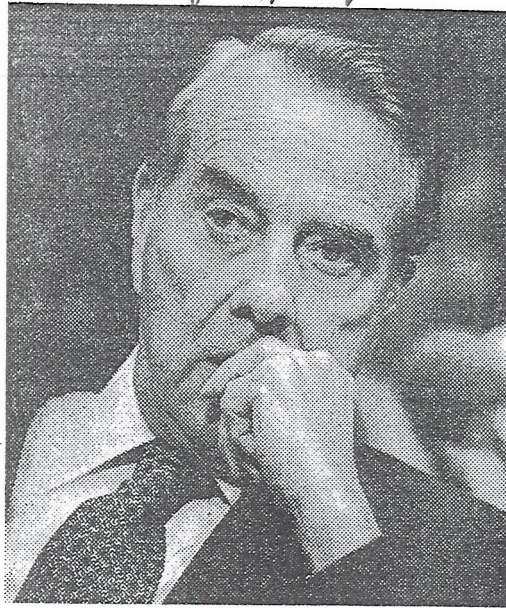


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Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (Kan.), running the Senate while running for the Republican nomination for president.

Balancing on High Wire, No Room for False Step

Dole Struggles Not to Lean Too Far Right

By Helen Dewar
Washington Post Staff Writer

In running for president while holding onto his job as Senate majority leader, Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) has ventured far out on the high wire of American politics without a net.

He has reached out to conservatives, many of whom are deeply skeptical of his more pragmatic past, by pushing their agenda, including some of the most contentious provisions of House Republicans' "Contract With America."

While he has not fallen, Dole has stumbled over issues rang-

ing from legal reforms and taxes to the nomination of Henry W. Foster Jr. to be surgeon general.

"It's a tough balancing act," said Sen. James M. Jeffords (R-Vt.), a moderate. "I guess he feels he has to move to the right, but if he moves too far and none of the program gets through, he's in trouble."

Only yesterday, bouncing from strategy sessions in his office to the Senate floor to a news conference and back to his office, Dole gave a vivid demonstration of the task he faces as he struggled to satisfy conservative tax cut advocates without

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alienating the moderates he needs to pass a budget for next year.

On issue after issue, Dole has adopted the politically correct position for a candidate seeking the GOP nomination, espousing the cause of ideological conservatives:

He took the no-tax-increase pledge in New Hampshire, reversing a stand that contributed to his defeat in the state's presidential primary seven years ago and to his withdrawal as a candidate.

He promised the National Rifle Association that he would give a high priority to legislation repealing the recently approved assault weapons ban, a more conspicuous role than he usually plays on gun issues.

He called for reexamination of affirmative action laws and said he would eliminate minority quotas and set-asides, surprising some civil

rights activists who have often counted on his support.

He lashed out at the entertainment industry in the language of a cultural conservative, accusing it of espousing "loveless sex" and operating "in a moral vacuum . . . without any suggestion that virtues are important."

Dole also has reached beyond conservatives to other groups, recently bidding for Jewish votes by introducing legislation, which he previously shunned, to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

"The Senate has become the site of the first Republican presidential primary," sighs Minority Leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.).

After years as the consummate Washington insider, master of legislative arts and skilled deal-cutter, the 71-year-old Dole—who has prowled the corridors of power in the Capitol for 35 years—has turned into a crusader, an

agent for change, a man of beyond-the-Beltway vision.

Dole's challenge is to pass the ideological litmus test that many Republican conservatives require for their presidential candidate while running an institution that is built on compromise. Reluctant to give up one job to get the other, he is trying to do both, even when they work at cross-purposes.

But when he pushes the Senate beyond its limits, as he has done several times recently, Dole risks trampling all over his strongest point: his reputation as a leader who can make things happen.

And always looking over Dole's right shoulder is Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.), a conservative rival for the GOP nomination who loves to draw clear ideological lines, especially ones that put Dole to his left. Gramm allies have delighted in watching Dole maneuvering to keep from being outflanked by the wily Texan. At

one point, Gramm suggested it would be Dole's fault if tax cuts were not included in the budget, although Gramm's crushing defeat on the tax issue Tuesday took some of the edge off this argument.

Dole takes umbrage at suggestions that the presidential campaign is driving the Senate agenda, saying he has taken great pains to separate the two. "The press is speculating that everything's based on presidential politics, but I think if my colleagues saw that happening they'd be upset," he said in an interview.

He has always had a conservative record, he noted, and is doing nothing more now than push as hard as he can for the agenda upon which the GOP-controlled Congress was elected last year. "I think people expect us to try. If we didn't try at all, I'd be roundly criticized—Bob Dole is timid, or whatever," he said.

"It poses a real conflict for him," said Sen. Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.), who is general

chairman of the Democratic National Committee. "His ultimate problem is that he's good at what he does and he's denying the very quality that could make him a good president, if he ever gets there."

Some well-wishers say Dole can satisfy suspicious conservatives by trying and failing, so long as he can blame his failures on a balky Senate or obstructionist Democrats. "He can say, 'I didn't compromise, we just didn't have the votes. I got what I could get,'" said Robert E. Lighthizer, a longtime Dole aide and campaign official.

But others see risks. "If he shapes a piece of legislation that looks as though it's the best we can do, then fine," said Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), a Gramm backer. "But it won't be fine if the legislation is so fraught with compromise that people feel they've been abandoned."

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Dole could solve the problem by stepping down as majority leader.

But he would lose the forum that elevates him above all his rivals and, when things go smoothly, showcases his leadership skills. "The longer he stays as leader the better it is for him," said Sen. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.), co-chairman for New England of Dole's campaign. "Republicans are looking for someone who can lead, and he's showing his capacity to do so in running the Senate."

He might also look like a quitter. "It would be seen as running away from a challenge," said Charles O. Jones of the Brookings Institution. "Bob Dole just isn't a quitter," added a Democratic colleague, referring to Dole's recovery from nearly fatal World War II wounds and the impact it has had on his tenacity and drive.

Besides, Dole, who was disappointed in two

previously unsuccessful tries for the GOP presidential nomination, clearly does not want to shut the door on returning to his Senate post if he fails again.

"As long as I'm doing my job as leader and not being consumed by presidential politics . . . I can stay right here," he said, noting that he can campaign full time on weekends and during recesses, including the October-to-January period when the Senate will not be in session.

Others are not so sure. "It's getting more and more difficult for him," McCain said.

So far this year, Dole has accumulated a Senate record with almost as many failures as successes. It is mainly a mixed bag of bills that go part way—a small way in some cases—toward assuring enactment of the far-reaching initiatives launched by the House, especially in its first 100 days.

Under his leadership, the Senate failed by one vote to approve the balanced-budget con-

stitutional amendment. It had to retreat on regulatory moratorium and on broad-ranging proposals to overhaul the country's civil litigation system, both of which had been approved by the House. Dole was rebuffed on overruling President Clinton's order banning federal contractors from permanent replacement of striking workers.

Dole says it is essential for Republicans to demonstrate that they tried. "If we can get 8 percent in the Senate, I'm not certain that's a that bad," he said.

The risks ahead are just as perilous, especially if the House starts cranking out the Christian Coalition's 10-point "Contract With the American Family," such as abortion curbs and a constitutional amendment to allow prayer in public schools. These are the kinds of issue that are most likely to split Senate Republicans and trigger filibusters that are difficult to overcome. Dole issued a statement welcoming the

n. Gramm, a Rival

proposals but was unclear about how many he might squeeze into the Senate schedule.

Dole understands that in the end it will be the party's conservatives who decide his fate at the GOP caucuses and primaries, and conservatives are exploiting the situation by trying to push him further to the right. "He needs us and he knows we know he needs us," one conservative said.

In a move that pleased abortion foes, Dole trumped Gramm's vow to lead a filibuster to block Foster's confirmation by threatening to use his power as majority leader to block the nomination from reaching the Senate floor. And his pledge to the NRA helped him with gun owners. But in both cases events intervened to complicate his plans.

Foster gained ground, even among Republicans, after a successful appearance at his confirmation hearing, leading to pressure on Dole to bring his nomination to a vote. Dole now

says he plans to meet with Foster before deciding what to do.

Even among the most ardent foes of the assault weapons ban, zeal for repeal was cooled by the federal building bombing in Oklahoma City last month. Action on assault weapons has now been put off.

Jerusalem presented another problem. Dole, who argued against the embassy move four years ago on grounds the Senate should not meddle in a sensitive situation, now pushes for the relocation. But he drew a mixed reaction from American Jewish leaders, some of whom accused him of pandering for Jewish votes.

He even distances himself from Washington by dismissing opposing views or things he does not want to talk about—including his legislative losses—as "inside the Beltway" matters.

So far, he seems to be holding his own with his balancing act. He remains the strong favorite for the nomination in polls, and a conservative strategist said the party's right sees Dole in the same way that President Ronald Reagan viewed the Soviets during treaty negotiations: "Trust but verify."