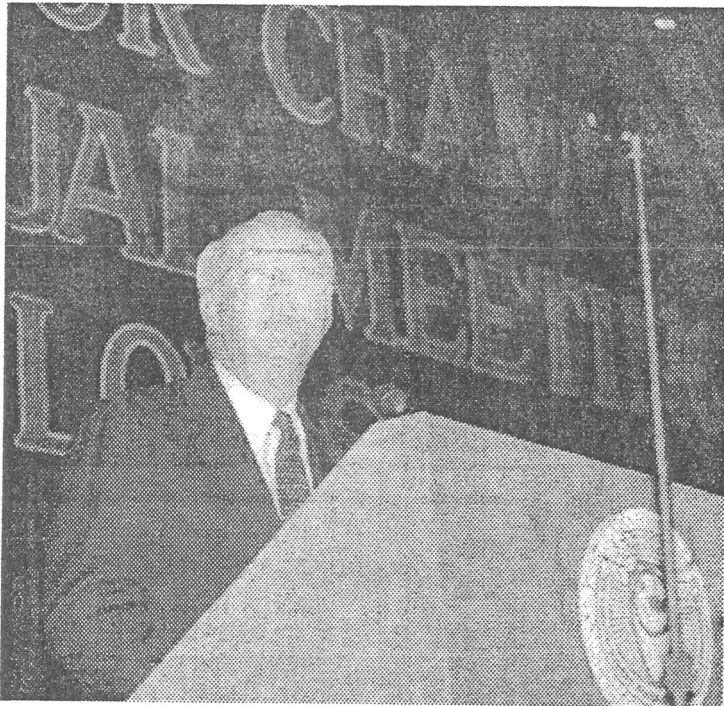


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Sen. Phil Gramm questioned Majority Leader Dole's commitment to tax relief in speech to the Junior Chamber of Commerce in St. Louis.

# Dole a Prime Target As GOP Candidates Sharpen Rhetoric

By David S. Broder  
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The elbows are starting to fly in the Republican presidential race.

After months of polite positioning for the marathon that lies ahead, several contenders for the GOP nomination have decided, almost in unison, to try knocking some of their opponents off balance. Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) has been the main target, as often happens to the man atop the polls, but he is by no means the only one.

Yesterday, for example, conservative commentator Patrick J. Buchanan went after all four of the senators running who support foreign aid, and dismissed everyone in the race except Rep.

Robert K. Dornan (Calif.) as opportunistic "leap-year conservatives."

That came a day after Sen. Phil Gramm (Tex.) teed off on Dole on the tax issue and former Tennessee governor Lamar Alexander challenged Dole's credentials to criticize Hollywood's standards on sex and violence.

But Haley Barbour, Republican National Committee chairman, said: "I don't think anything has happened that deserves any jawboning on my part. This is an open nomination contest and candidates are going to try to make their case and point out their differences. It's nothing at all untoward."

The sharper rhetoric comes at a time when the eight other candidates are scrambling to establish themselves as the leading alternative to Dole, while doing what they can to slow his momentum. It is earlier in the cycle than this usually occurs, but as Alexander spokesman Mark Merritt remarked, "it's just one more indicator of the rapidly accelerated pace of this year's campaign."

The candidates announced and began their fund-raising much earlier than the Democrats did four years ago, when they were lining up to oppose President George Bush. In the next 90 days, they will be bumping into each other more frequently, as many of the contenders will virtually be camped in Iowa and New Hampshire, where the first delegate contests will be held in February. Alexander this week began television advertising in those two states.

And, as Barbour noted, "there's so little interest in presidential politics, as compared to what Congress is doing, I can understand candidates doing

this"—making more pointed criticisms of each other.

Buchanan, whose sharp-edged attacks on Bush in the 1992 primaries delighted Democrats, has begun to convince some New Hampshire observers that he may be more than a protest candidate this time. In a news conference yesterday, he went after Dole and Gramm by name and others generically. Buchanan said if he were majority leader, he would "veto" President Clin-



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**Speaking to National Press Club, Patrick J. Buchanan challenged Dole to block a vote on surgeon general nominee Henry W. Foster Jr.**

ton's nomination of Henry W. Foster Jr. to be surgeon general by refusing to call it up for a vote—a step Dole earlier said he was considering, but on Monday rejected.

He faulted Dole and Gramm and, implicitly, two other contenders, Sens. Richard G. Lugar (Ind.) and Arlen Specter (Pa.), for continuing to support foreign aid. Buchanan argued for a three-year phaseout of foreign aid, saying the "Republican Party is making a major mistake . . . [by] handing out America's wealth to foreign regimes" while domestic programs are being reduced.

On Monday, it was Gramm on the offensive against Dole, telling the Junior Chamber of Commerce convention that the majority leader was "too moderate, too committed to the old ways of Washington of tax and spend." Gramm, who lost a key tax-cut amendment earlier, said he would continue to battle against any compromise with the tax cut passed by House Republicans.

Gramm also has vowed to filibuster the Foster nomination to prevent a vote, which Dole and others have predicted the nominee would win.

As for Alexander, he was reported to be "very pleased" by the reaction to his speech at the U.S. Conference of Mayors convention, in which he took on Dole more directly than ever before. Alexander said that in criticizing Hollywood for undermining American values, Dole had overlooked Washington's role in weakening the ethic of personal responsibility.

Nelson Warfield, Dole campaign press secretary, dismissed it all, saying, "It's pretty clear evidence that as the humidity has started to hit Washington, some of the other candidates have started to sweat. . . . While Bob Dole stands toe-to-toe with Bill Clinton, fighting for a tax cut and a balanced budget, the other contenders are reduced to taking potshots at fellow Republicans."

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*Staff researcher Roland Matijas contributed to this report.*