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Armey Of the Shameless

YOU'D THINK they might be getting a little self-conscious, the Republicans—maybe not at the Hugh Grant level, but close.

Here they are slashing government spending ruthlessly, bidding widows and orphans to pull up their socks, showering money on the Pentagon, tossing environmental laws to the winds, laughing at safety regulations. The bottom line? A tax cut for the rich.

The banner line? Freedom. Freedom from oppressive government, freedom from meddling bureaucrats and strangling regulations. No one is saying that government is not too fat or that many public employees would be improved by firing. But the Republicans are going beyond all that. We're now talking about freedom to eat contaminated meat—they're fighting tooth and nail against inspection reforms, the first since 1906. We're talking about freedom from education through cuts in Head Start funding.

You would think their unabashed exertions in behalf of the strong, the wealthy and the lucky might cause a touch of defensiveness, but except for some scratchy comments by Republican leader Bob Dole about

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"absurd distortions" by his enemies, there's little.

Dick Armey, majority leader of the House, where meat inspection goes to the floor this week, has not the fear of voter reprisal for meanness.

"I'm the Republican least affected by that," he told a press breakfast. "It's just the Democrats talking about class warfare. No one is listening to them."

Armey, a big, beefy Texan, is renowned for plain talk. He told off both Clintons serially in face-to-face encounters: Told him he would be a one-term president, her that reports of her charm were "overstated." Like House Speaker Gingrich, he is a former professor and an author—of "The Freedom Revolution."

Society venture that has bipartisan support, are the first in 25 years. Studies show that poor children benefit greatly from it. They are less apt to drop out, go to jail or have babies out of wedlock. It represents the one chance the ghetto child has to make it in the first grade. Children from homes where Mom is on crack and Dad is in the slammer find order and routine for the first time when they go to Head Start. They learn letters, numbers, shapes. They have a good lunch. They are made to feel valuable and important.

But the House Labor-HHS-Education subcommittee cut \$135 million from the \$3 billion budget for Head Start. The chairman, John Porter (R-Ill.), is considered by both sides to be one of the

Here's his prescription for national revival: "Clear it all away, scrap the whole apparatus of social engineering, return power to the people and I believe our culture will awaken as from a bad dream."

His god is Ronald Reagan. Never mind that the Reagan philosophy of tax-cutting, increased military spending and balanced budget failed. He wants to try again. He sees Americans rattling their chains, yearning to be free of the programs and rules that constrain them. He deeply resents the idea that people get to be 65 and go on Medicare.

Armey and Gingrich both believe that the earthquake election of 1994 was a ratification of their views. They are further isolated by a tendency to look at programs in budgetary, rather than human, terms.

The cuts in Head Start, the one Great

most decent members of the House, and he is a fan of the program.

"It is very popular," he explains. "We made a relatively modest reduction—we had to make a total of \$9 billion in cuts, after all—and the decrease is not meant to show any hostility. Some of their new programs are poorly designed and we wanted to send them a message to be more careful."

Rep. Dale Kildee (D-Mich.) says, "Do we ever send a message to the Pentagon about any spending we don't like? No, this message goes to the poor children who lose Head Start, 45,000 of them."

Kildee is one of the program's outstanding champions. He is also a fan of Porter, who, he thinks, is doing the best he can under the "imperial speakership" of Newt Gingrich. He points out that less than

one-third of the eligible 3- and 4-year-olds are now enrolled in Head Start.

As for the fierce fight against adopting new high-tech measures to detect bacteria in meat and poultry, there is simply nothing to be said for the Dole position. The big corporations are opposed to it, and Dole is posing as the protector of small businesses, which would need to adopt higher sanitation standards under the reforms.

Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-N.Y.) observed tartly at a Capitol Hill press conference that small businesses that sold bad meat would not be in business long. Meat contaminated with the E. coli bacteria sickens 20,000 Americans every year, killing hundreds. But those are the breaks and, hey, who's counting?