

At 6 Months, House GOP Juggernaut Still Cohesive

By David S. Broder
Washington Post Staff Writer

Last Wednesday a group of disgruntled and quarrelsome Republicans gathered in Room H227 of the Capitol for a combination therapy session, political strategy seminar and religious revival meeting. But more than anything, it was a display of the leadership prowess that has made the narrow Republican majority in the House one of the most co-

hesive legislative forces in the modern era.

The meeting was called by Majority Leader Richard K. Arney (Tex.) after almost half the 73-member freshman class rebelled over funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, threatening defeat of a major spending bill if the endowment was not put out of business now. The display of disunity was almost a mirror image of a fissure last August that signaled the im-

minent collapse of the Democrats' long rule.

Back then, dissident Democrats joined Republicans to block the crime bill. It took the shellshocked Democratic leadership 10 days to renegotiate the measure and get it passed. But by then, there was no time or energy to devote to the Clinton health care plan and the stage was set for the November rout. Faced with a similar challenge, Arney and his partners in the House

Republican leadership needed only three hours to find a solution and the GOP juggernaut was back on track.

According to several participants, Arney let the combatants—freshmen on one side, Appropriations and Rules Committee elders on the other—vent their frustration. After they had repeated their arguments for about 15 minutes, Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) sauntered in and flashed the ever-intense Arney a big smile. See REPUBLICANS, A12, Col. 1

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grin. It was a shorthand way of reminding Army of advice Rep. J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) had given them: "When you smile, you look more approachable."

Then the speaker leaned back and took in the debate, finally breaking his silence to recount an anecdote from his early years in the House. Business consultant Daryl Conner was the bystander as Gingrich and a third man engaged in a heated argument, each of them adamantly repeating his point as if the other were deaf. "Hold it, guys," Conner said. "I want each of you to tell the other in your own words what you just heard him say."

"Now, I want you to do that," Gingrich said, glancing around the room. In short order, the young conservatives were able to say that the moderates wanted "a certain time and a fair amount of money to let NEA find its way off the federal budget and into private financing," while the moderates understood that conservatives "needed to be able to

say that at a definite point, the government subsidy will end."

"Once you got both sides understanding what the other side needed... the whole dynamic changed," Gingrich said Friday. Once the ice broke, he vanished, and Arney spent another hour and a half negotiating the deal for a two-year phase-out, instead of the bill's original three. The next morning, House Republicans voted it through.

What happened in Room H227 tells a lot about the personalities, techniques and compelling political forces that have powered the House Republicans through the first six months of this historic Congress—and that will be tested even more in the months ahead.

The cohesion the House GOP has displayed has impressed even skeptical Democrats. When former House speaker Jim Wright (D) encountered Arney at home in Texas recently, he offered a backhanded compliment. "I told Dick," Wright said, "that I sure did disagree with the direction they were taking the country, but I have to take my hat off to

them for the assertion of leadership in making the House move and fulfill an agenda."

The initial momentum was supplied by the exhilaration of their midterm election sweep, accompanied by their realization that their shaky 14-vote majority could easily disappear in 1996 if they fell to quarreling among themselves.

With virtual unanimity, the House GOP rushed through the planks of the "Contract With America" well within the promised 100 days. On average, fewer than five Republicans dissented on the 33 roll calls testing contract provisions. Sixteen of the 33 were unanimous; term limits, with 40 dissidents, proved to be the most controversial and the only loser.

In June, the broad outlines of a seven-year plan for eliminating the federal deficit also proved to be readily acceptable to Republicans. Only one voted no. But this month, as appropriations bills have come to the floor, cuts in spending for specific programs are testing that unity. Many see the likelihood of further

sharp battles as the agenda turns to the polarizing social issues of abortion and school prayer—and finally Medicare and other entitlement cutbacks.

Gingrich said in an interview after Wednesday's blowup, "I told Dick that I don't mind losing something every once in a while, because it takes the shock away. The Japanese lost the Battle of Midway because of victory fever. I don't mind losing small fights now because there are harder ones to come."

The generational and ideological fault lines that surfaced in last Wednesday's fight remain there as a threat to GOP unity. Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.) had predicted a week earlier that under the pressure of clashing constituency interests in the appropriations bills, "you'll see their unity begin to crack and crumble."

But Gephardt also acknowledged that Republicans "see this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. When you've been in the desert 40 years, your instinct is to help Moses."

As the man who showed the House GOP the way to the promised land, Gingrich practices what one leadership aide calls "charismatic" leadership, in contrast to the "bureaucratic" model followed by the last speaker, Thomas S. Foley (D-Wash.), who spent his days negotiating agreements among competing Democratic caucuses and turf-conscious committee chairmen. "When someone comes to Newt with an idea, he says, 'Make it your project.' It is very empowering."

No one feels that more than the freshmen and sophomores who make up a majority of the House GOP and who—unlike Democrats when they were in power—give far more deference to the speaker than to the committee chairmen. Gingrich lunches weekly with the freshmen and repeatedly tells them, as freshman Rep. David M. McIntosh (Ind.) put it, "You have what it takes to help us reduce and reinvent this government. Don't sit in your office and gripe. Tell us how to change things."

Freshman Rep. Sue Myrick (N.C.), who shares the leadership liaison duties with McIntosh, said: "What I like about Newt is that he's totally open. You can walk in and argue about anything."

The committee and subcommittee chairmen were handpicked by Gingrich, not always on the basis of seniority. In exercising an authority Democrats never gave to Foley or his predecessors, Gingrich made the chairmen almost as beholden to him as the rawest freshman.

Instead of flexing his muscle, he has earned a reputation as "the best listener in the House." Gingrich describes his role with both freshmen and veterans as "coach."

"It was no accident," he said, "that I shared my last birthday with Joe Paterno and Lou Holtz."

Like any good coach, Gingrich is thinking about the next game. House Republican Conference Chairman John A. Boehner (Ohio) said: "He is always ahead of us. The last six weeks we were working on the contract, he spent 75 percent of his time thinking through the budget issues. And since May, he has been working on the Medicare problems we'll face in September."

Beyond his coaching duties, Arme said last week, "Newt is the visionary. He reaches out to the world. He is the spokesman and the front man in the organization."

Speeches and television appearances crowd his schedule—a contrast to the low profile Foley and most other recent speakers took.

Gingrich is free to do this because he has turned over to Arme most if not all of the traditional duties of a speaker. "My role is running the day-to-day business of the House," Arme said, "and Newt has been very good about honoring the distinction."

The terms of the partnership were formed back in 1993, when Arme became conference chairman (the No. 3 job) and Gingrich was whip (No. 2) behind soon-to-retire Minority Leader Robert H. Michel (Ill.). "When Dick became conference chairman," Gingrich said Friday, "he was obviously so smart and effective, I recognized I had to make him my senior partner or we would stumble over each other"—and possibly find themselves opponents for the top spot.

They rehearsed their roles during the formulation of the contract. Gingrich provided the vision of a formal document that would set the agenda for a Republican Congress and be subscribed to by virtually every GOP candidate. Arme worked out the language, logistics and publicity. In the course of that venture, their staffs also became what one calls "virtually interchangeable," a huge help today.

Now, the division of labor is so comfortable that Gingrich laughingly recalled that at a recent meeting, Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (Kan.) "was shocked when I couldn't even tell him what was on the House floor that day."

Coordinating the operation still takes lots of work. Major strategy decisions come from the twice-weekly meetings of the Speaker's Advisory Group—which in addition to Gingrich, Arme, Boehner, Hastert and Rep. Robert S. Walker



SPEAKER NEWT GINGRICH

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(Pa.), includes chief whip Tom DeLay (Tex.) and National Republican Congressional Committee Chairman Bill Paxon (N.Y.).

Once a week, an expanded leadership group, including major committee chairmen, gathers in Gingrich's office to swap information. At least weekly, Boehner holds a conference open to all Republicans, for discussion of the current agenda, and Republican Policy Committee Chairman Christopher Cox (Calif.) has a forum for members particularly interested in an issue that is down the road.

"Running the House this way re-

quires real two-way communication between the membership and the leadership," Cox said.

Much of the tension arises from the conflict between two promises Gingrich made. One was to move ahead fast on an agreed-upon party agenda—the contract, first, and now the deficit-ending budget. The second was to liberate the House floor from the restrictions of which Republicans complained so bitterly during the long Democratic rule and let members offer amendments freely.

To resolve this obvious contradiction, Arme has made himself arbitrator of which amendments are added to appropriations bills and has written an elaborate set of rules. As last Wednesday's blowup showed, the process does not always work, but at least it has reduced the number of battles.

Boehner's job as conference chairman is to handle the internal and external communications—to give

members a heads-up on legislation headed for the floor and also to mobilize the allied interest groups and lobbyists, with whom he meets every Thursday.

After the public relations fiasco with the school lunch program last spring—when Republicans were accused of cutbacks they insist did not exist—Boehner has urged every committee chairman bringing a major bill to the floor to prepare a bat-

tle plan for public relations, lobbying efforts and vote mobilization.

The actual vote-producing job falls to DeLay and Hastert and their organization of 50 deputy and assistant whips. "We call our operation grow-the-vote," DeLay said. "We do our preliminary count two or three weeks ahead of time, and then the deputy whip in charge of that bill—usually a member of the committee bringing it to the floor—does the follow-up with help from all of us." DeLay and Hastert lobby conservative Democrats for support to offset what so far have been rare Republican defections.

Up to this point, Republicans are giving their enthusiastic assent to

most of the bills the leadership brings to the floor. More liberal members like Rep. Christopher H. Shays (Conn.) and conservatives like Rep. Ernest J. Istook Jr. (Okla.) complain mildly that they have occasionally been blocked by a leadership they think is too protective of the other extreme. "Both sides gripe that the tail is wagging the dog," Armev said. "I guess I'm the dog."

But overall, said Rep. Roger Wicker (Miss.), freshman class president, "we're focused on very large objectives, like finally bringing this budget into balance, and we realize we have a very big opportunity."

Staff researcher Barbara J. Saffir contributed to this report.