

The Rise And Folly Of the GOP

*As Voter Disgust Rises,
So Do Clinton's Chances*

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By Kevin Phillips

WHAT A DIFFERENCE eight months make. January's Capitol Hill champagne has been replaced by August's bile. Speaker Newt Gingrich's promise to the National Rifle Association of no new gun control laws, coupled with his support for legislative riders to cripple the Environmental Protection Agency, are beginning to scare Northern GOP House members, at least, out of what has been an electoral reverie—a suspension of reality. As the speaker and his legislative militia head home for the recess, we probably know several important new (or renewed) realities about American politics:

The first is that no opposition Congress and House leadership (at least since the invention of polling) has lost so much credibility so quickly. The 104th Congress already invites comparisons with the last Republican majority on Capitol Hill to face a Democratic president—the 80th Congress, elected back in 1946. Gingrich's crowd makes the 80th Congress—which proceeded to lose 75 Republican House members and nine senators in 1948—look like a convention of wise men by comparison.

President Clinton, January's irrelevant man, is back in action and may even be able to turn Gingrich and his followers into a kind of balance-of-power Halloween poster for his own re-election: *Scared of Newt? Vote for Bill.*

The American people are disgusted again—should anyone really be surprised? According to a new poll by the Americans Talk Issues Foundation, disdain for Washington, national politics and the current party system has hit record highs this year, foreshadowing yet another round of electoral volatility and insurrection in 1996.

This is not hyperbole. The 104th Congress—the radical House, much more than the Senate—has set a record for provoking

disillusionment in just eight months of new party control. Gingrich is not only the first speaker to be rated in polls as too extreme. He has also, as Democratic consultants (truthfully) joke, managed to garner negative ratings at a pace heretofore matched only by mass murderers. Back in December, the public approved of congressional Republican policies and programs by 52 percent to 28 percent, according to Times-Mirror survey data. In June the public *disapproved* by 45 percent to 41 percent. A more recent NBC poll shows even further deterioration of Congress's standing.

Should GOP strategists be worried? I think so, because the party took the gimmicky Contract With America and locked itself into a riverboat gamble.

Of its major provisions, two useful ideas have been enacted—one to make Congress follow federal laws just like everyone else and another to bar Congress from imposing unfunded mandates.

Three have been blocked by the House or Senate—term limits, the balanced budget amendment and regulatory reform. The line-item veto is stalled by House-Senate conference inability to agree. Others measures in the crime, tax, welfare and tort reform areas have not yet been acted upon by the Senate. In several cases, national skepticism of the GOP measures has only grown with national awareness.

It's too soon to say, but the Contract With America is in some danger of undergoing a

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major political metamorphosis: Late 1994's radical (as in "bold") agenda is becoming late 1995's radical (as in "crazy") agenda. More and more of what the House sets in motion is starting to look to mainstream voters like a right-wing caricature.

Gingrich's written pledge to the NRA to block gun control legislation is of a piece with Contract ingredients such as the House bill to gut federal regulation of business; the recent House appropriations rider to block money for key aspects of environmental protection; and the radical budget package that slashes \$270 billion of future Medicare funding to facilitate \$250 billion of tax cuts tilted to the upper-brackets while leaving virtually every current corporate and financial tax-break in place. Even for New Democrats given to burbling about "common ground," this legislative record is the equivalent of a Goodyear blimp floating over an anti-aircraft battery.

Two decades ago, the Republicans nailed the Democrats—and not inaccurately—as the party of acid, amnesty and abortion. Now, they

themselves could be just as validly indicted as the party of gunk, gun clubs and granny-bashing. Forget that talk about a generation of national conservative hegemony. This is a blueprint for the resurrection of Bill Clinton. In several trial heats, he's already moved ahead of Republican frontrunner Bob Dole. Small wonder that Clinton likes to meet with and elevate Gingrich.

This year's outbreak of ideological rabies in the House could also help Clinton unify his party. More than a few Democrats, especially on Capitol Hill, have little respect for him. But one possible key to his survival (assuming that Whitewater investigation pay dirt doesn't moot the issue) is to sidestep the Democratic primary challenge that has forced into retirement or helped defeat every Democratic president seeking a second elected term since World War II. Avoiding that kind of serious opposition could make Clinton the November favorite, and one way to do so could be to: 1) define the fight against House GOP radicalism as *the* overriding issue; and 2) claim Clinton has to stay in Washington to lead Democrats against Typhoid Newt.

Which brings me to a final reality: the rapidly rekindling contempt and disgust of the American people. Since 1988, the political option presented to voters by the Republican-Democratic duopoly has been a choice between Michael Dukakis and George Bush; then between Bush and Bill Clinton; and finally between letting Clinton go off half-cocked for two more years or curbing him with Gingrich and a GOP Congress.

The upshot has been twin emotions at the grassroots: vitriol (why does this country now have to settle for so little in its leaders?) and volatility. In 1991, George Bush had a 90 percent job approval rating; in the summer of 1992, he was down to 30 percent—and a replacement-minded nation was ready to gamble

on a small-state governor with dubious moral credentials. Clinton, elected as the un-Bush, also promptly swan-dived in the polls, emerging in 1994 as the new portrait of political failure. In another major mood-swing, voters thereupon elected a GOP Congress as an anti-Clinton roadblock. Now, the GOP Congress, having misread November as a mandate rather than another negative landslide, is in danger of becoming the newest symbol of inadequacy.

The data in the new Americans Talk Issues poll is a striking rebuttal to Republicans who say "Ah, but the public wanted radical solutions, and that's what we're giving them." Yes and no. The public wanted radical solutions, yes, but largely of a different variety.

Early 1995's congressional reforms won deserved applause as a means to advance voter concerns. Since then, most of the GOP's economic and regulatory agenda has represented exactly the opposite. What we have seen in the last six months, more in the House but also in

the Senate, is a spurning of the public's priorities—law and order, clean air and water, deficit-reduction that protects Medicare and makes corporations and millionaires pay more, lobby reform, honest campaign finance, term limits and more policy input by public referendum—in order to gratify the very different desires of upper-bracket lobbies and special interests.

Like the Bill Clinton who's already busy fundraising for his re-election at \$100,000 a plate dinners, the Capitol Hill GOP is incapable of representing the grassroots because of its commitment to the *cashroots*—to the big contributors whose gratitude for important regulations and amendments is expressed so tangibly in \$25,000 and \$50,000 checks.

Despite early 1995 inside-the-Beltway fasci-

nation with the "new" Washington, voters have maintained a sounder realism, expecting just what they now say they're still getting: more semi-corrupt politics as usual. In the new bipartisan poll, a record 76 percent say Washington government can't be trusted, up from 72 percent in 1994. One survey-taker involved, Republican Fred Steeper, bluntly says "Republicans and Democrats share the blame." And his Democratic opposite number, Stanley Greenberg, adds, "The political cynicism has not been dispelled by the winds of change. If anything, it's been worsened."

Most Washington insiders just didn't get what the 1994 revulsion was: genuine voter anger, a three-decade build-up of disenchantment. Such disillusionment isn't going to be overcome with cosmetic reforms, smaller-government speeches written by unsafe-meat lobbyists, term-limits gimmicks and Republican influence-peddlers replacing Democratic influence-peddlers at the trough. The next reform wave has to wash a lot deeper.

Steeper and Greenberg admit that there is now a major opening for a third party or something like it. That was predictable in January; Spring polls showed 55 to 60 percent of Americans favoring one. Moreover, of the five oft-mentioned possible 1996 third-party or independent candidates, just one is a Democrat—Jesse Jackson. Four have their origins in GOP politics or administrations: Colin Powell, Ross Perot, Lowell Weicker and Pat Buchanan. The cracks in the party foundations are bipartisan; one or two independent presidential candidacies in 1996 are reasonably likely.

Worried Republicans and Democrats are trying to change state laws to squelch third parties and independents, but the tides of the 1990s ap-

pear to be running the other way. Consider: Ross Perot told a mid-June meeting of House GOP freshmen he couldn't promise them safety from third-party House candidates in 1996 without deep reforms in lobbying and campaign finance.

Meanwhile, close allies of Jesse Jackson have been pursuing the idea of changing state laws—only 10 jurisdictions now permit this—to let third-parties cross-endorse major party presi-

dential and congressional candidates. The Wisconsin-based Center for a New Democracy, advised that the cross-endorsement barriers now in 40 states cannot stand a strong constitutional challenge, is looking for a case to try to get to the U.S. Supreme Court. And the Libertarian Party has just boasted that it will have 1996 congressional candidates in over half of the 435 House districts—the first such broad minor-party mobilization since 1920.

House Democratic Leader Dick Gephardt recently followed Perot's 1992 platform to endorse national referenda on tax-rate increases, and a number of Republicans have suggested a national referendum on term limits. In turn, New Right leader Paul Weyrich and consumer crusader Ralph Nader are continuing their fight for state None-of-the-Above lines on ballots to create another alternative to the Republican-Democratic conundrum.

Doubtless the 1996 elections will have more and bigger things to deal with, but it's hard to avoid concluding that the next revolution must also try to answer this predicament: *how to get rid of the bums you elected a year or two ago without going back to the losers you elected before that.* This, sad to say, does go to the heart of the problem Washington and America will face in the next 15 months.