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# THE FEDERAL PAGE

## Centralized Republican Power House

### Weekly Strategy Sessions Give Gingrich and Company the Right Stuff to Handle Congress

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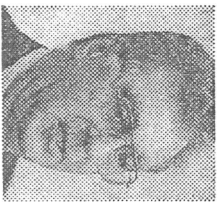
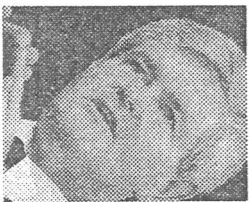
Last Friday, on the eve of Labor Day weekend, Daniel P. Meyer and Kerry A. Knott—the chiefs of staff for Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and Majority Leader Richard K. Armev (R-Tex.)—held their regular weekly session with staffers from the House GOP leadership and key committees.

They refined plans for Congress's return that were pulled together during the August recess, which include a half-day conference next week for House Republicans to discuss the issues they face in the coming session.

They also finalized the daily floor schedule, the most problematic amendments and agendas for upcoming leadership meetings—including the Speaker's Administrative Group (SAG)—all of which must get Gingrich's approval.

The weekly leadership staff meeting is part of a new organizational phenomenon in the House, one that sets Gingrich apart from past speakers and one that may account for his legislative successes. While Democratic speakers, including Thomas S. Foley (Wash.) Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill (Mass.) and the legendary Sam Rayburn (Tex.), eschewed formal organizations, Gingrich appreciates the importance of structure and has set up an unprecedented apparatus to centralize his power.

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uraced management concepts," said one top GOP aide. "Very cohesive" is how another put it, referring to Gingrich, Armev and Majority Whip Tom Delay (Tex.) and House Republican Conference Chairman John A. Boehner (Ohio).

Their top aides also are close knit. Meyer, Knott and Edward W. Gillespie, Armev's policy/communications director, along with Barry Jackson, Boehner's chief of staff on the Republican Conference, all "worked last year on the Contract [With America] . . . and now, all of us kids are playing in one sandbox," one aide said.

The Republicans "are certainly more centralized than we were," conceded Thomas J. O'Donnell, chief of staff to House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.). But, he added, "We're a lot more centralized than before, too, because of the challenge we face as a minority."

Gingrich's role and the roles of the other three GOP leaders are clear, another leadership aide said. "Newt is the strategist and overseer. Armev runs things day by day. Delay's job is growing the vote and counting the vote," the aide said. "Boehner deals with [outsidel] coalitions, communications and member services."

Gingrich holds weekly leadership meetings on Mondays or Tuesdays, always preceded by a session of SAG, a sort of executive committee. They discuss tactics for the week. There's a second SAG meeting toward the end of the week to plan long-range strategy.

In addition to Gingrich, Armev, Delay and Boehner, regular SAG participants include Bill

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Paxon (N.Y.), chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee; J. Dennis Hastert (Ill.), chief deputy majority whip; and Rep. Robert S. Walker (Pa.), who has always been close to the speaker.

"Each has a top staff aide usually there," one staffer said, "and they interact as peers. Any boss can turn to his staff or another's with a question, and they are all comfortable with those roles."

On occasion, he said, SAG "can morph into something else", such as when John R. Kasich (Ohio), Budget Committee chairman, and Bob Livingston (La.), Appropriations Committee chairman, were invited to join the discussions.

"Newt throws in another layer with a variety of task forces, like on Medicare," another aide said. "His reason is to let people not on relevant committees, but with some expertise, have their say."

This week three SAG meetings are planned "to walk them through the rest of the year," an aide said.

But the GOP leadership group is only one of a handful of groups that has been organized to tightly manage the GOP's new regime in the House.

Boehner meets weekly with directors of what one aide called "core coalitions"—groups such as the National Federation of Independent Business, the Chamber of Commerce and the Christian Coalition. Boehner outlines the leadership's message for the week and "they go back to their shops and disseminate it to their membership," one aide said. In turn, the coalitions pass on what their groups are doing and Boehner takes that back to the House leadership.

The Republican Policy Committee, under Rep.

Christopher Cox (Calif.), also meets regularly "to ventilate key issues coming up" and often queries subcommittee members dealing with controversial issues.

Then there is the Speaker's Office for Legislative Floor Activities, which was created on Jan. 4, the first day of Congress. While in the minority, the Republicans had six slots for floor operations. The majority Democrats had no such setup.

The GOP created three top congressional salary slots (\$122,932) for the speaker's new floor office. It is run by Leonard Swinehart, who held the floor leadership job for Gingrich when he was minority whip.

Also on Jan. 4, the House approved \$200,000 for a new GOP Steering Committee that deals primarily with new committee assignments and another \$200,000 for a new Democratic Steering and Policy Committee.

Gingrich's communications team also holds a weekly meeting for leadership and members' communications specialists.

At 8:45 a.m. every weekday in Room H-233 at the Capitol, the 41-year-old Meyer runs a meeting of a dozen senior Gingrich staffers to discuss the upcoming day and plan ahead.

A week ago, for example, the group agreed to put reconciliation and Medicare meetings on Gingrich's Thursday and Friday schedules and reserve time for the speaker to meet separately with several state governors who will be in town.

"It's useful to spend time in advance planning where he will be; otherwise his time is all eaten up," Meyer said.

Among those who sit in on Meyer's morning staff meeting are a handful of Hill specialists, several of whom have worked together before, and a few going back to Meyer's days with then-Sen. Rudy Boschwitz (R-Minn.) and then-Rep. Vin Weber (R-Minn.). Outside Gingrich's office, only press secretary Tony Blankley is a familiar public name.

Around the table with Blankley are some political veterans: John W. "Jack" Howard, who before doing policy issues for Gingrich did legislative work for Pennsylvania's Walker and spent four years in the Bush White House; Arne L. Christenson, who handles budget issues and worked for both Weber and Boschwitz; Gardner G. Peckman, a foreign policy and national security specialist who worked for nine years on the minority staff of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and two years in the Bush State Department; Ed Kutler, who does trade, health care and taxes; and Leigh Ann Metzger, the communications coordinator, who worked for the National Republican Congressional Committee, the Bush White House and most recently the Republican National Committee.

Hovering over the group is Martha Hardy Lott, the woman who controls the speaker's schedule.

*Staff writer Dan Morgan contributed to this report.*