

Fissures in the ranks wreak havoc on conservative agenda

by William Jones

Earlier this year, as freshmen Republicans walked from the Capitol to the Heritage Foundation, following, goggle-eyed, the gurus of the “Conservative Revolution” led by knuckle-dragger Rush Limbaugh and salon floozy Arianna Huffington, they felt confident of being able to force their radical agenda on an unsuspecting America. After an initial 100 days of frenetic activity, in which they succeeded in ramming through hardly one-third of their agenda, the Conservative Revolution and its Contract with America started to falter. The “steamroller” of House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) began to sputter.

At this point, the “sound and fury” of the first hundred days is beginning to look more and more like the “tale told by an idiot.” After all, behind all the fanfare about Newt’s Contract, was the Big Lie that the American people had somehow in the November elections bought the panaceas of the Conservative Revolution. The media hype around the beaming “Boy Wonder” served to make the Big Lie almost credible. But the ugly reality of the conservative agenda began to show itself in a practical way—in the fissures developing over that very agenda within the Republican Party itself.

Deserted on environmentalism

Confirmation of the splits was seen in the scurrying of many GOP lawmakers over an Appropriations bill for the Environmental Protection Agency. On July 28, fifty-one GOPers joined 160 Democrats to eliminate a broad package of provisions that would have curbed the EPA’s enforcement of clean air and water standards. The EPA had come in for a lot of criticism for its draconian restrictions—for ostensibly environmental reasons—on industrial development and exploitation of natural resources.

Over the past years, the environmental lobby has succeeded, in both the Bush and Clinton administrations, in

implementing a large part of its “green” agenda. Only recently has the Clinton administration begun to ease up on many of the restrictions imposed by the EPA. Because of the pervasiveness of its activity, the EPA has become a symbol for many of “intrusive government.” The Republicans succeeded in tapping that growing dissatisfaction against the environmental lobby, despite that lobby’s pervasive influence in the Bush administration.

The current bill would significantly reduce EPA funding. Not being satisfied with that, conservative Republicans went hog-wild, introducing 17 riders to the bill, which would have barred the EPA from using funds to enforce a slew of regulations affecting pesticides, emissions from oil refineries and toxic waste incinerators, runoff of storm water and sewage into rivers and lakes, and accident prevention plans in chemical plants. Not wanting to be labeled as “anti-environmental” by the green wing of the party, many Republicans joined with Democrats to eliminate those riders. As Rep. Wayne Gilchrest (R-Md.) put it, “They [the voters] may have been voting to get government off their backs, but they weren’t voting to get arsenic in their water or benzene in their air,” indicating the fears of how their vote might be played by their opponents.

House Republican leaders, aghast at what had happened to one of their pet projects, quickly moved to limit the damage. On July 31, House Majority Leader Richard Armey (R-Tex.) signaled that he would, under House rules, force a second vote on the matter after the House had completed all other action on the bill. As legislators began to straggle back from their weekend in the districts, they were hit by lobbyists and fellow legislators eager to get them to reverse the earlier vote. Rushing to a vote before all legislators had returned, Armey just barely succeeded, in a 210-210 tie vote, in maintaining the riders intact.

Housing, labor bills changed

In other action, a revolt led by Rep. Rick Lazio (R-N.Y.) produced changes in a housing appropriations bill which, at Lazio's urging, restored more than \$600 million in housing funds for the elderly, sick, and disabled, and eliminated rent increases. Another measure that would have eased enforcement of job safety and labor laws, also provoked a revolt from Republicans in districts with strong labor constituencies, who feared the electoral fall-out from such anti-labor provisions. As Capitol Hill staffers have readily admitted to *EIR*, legislators are getting the message from their constituents back home that they aren't exactly thrilled by the "Contract" agenda.

Another issue that has helped fuel constituent anger toward GOP representatives in recent weeks, has been the inept and flagrantly partisan handling of the Waco and Whitewater hearings. When congressmen, especially first-termers, went back home for the July 4 recess, they began picking up dissatisfaction over the partisanship. Those feelings were aggravated by the middle of July, when the Senate Whitewater and House Waco hearings turned into such shameful performances. This added to the growing belief among many Republicans, according to Washington sources, that they had better show a bit more independence from Gingrich, Armev, and the House leadership.

Abortion, taxes, and welfare 'reform'

A sensitive item that was conspicuously absent from the Gingrich Contract, dealt with abortion. Although many of the newer conservative Republicans are pro-life, the New Age Gingrich, ever a pragmatist, didn't want to touch that "hot-button" item prior to an election campaign. But even after the elections, Gingrich has done everything to skirt the issue—much to the chagrin of many conservative members. Inevitably, however, it did come up and proved one of the most rancorous issues in the Republican Party.

Anti-abortion activists and the Christian Coalition made an all-out effort to eliminate funding for a 25-year-old federal family planning program. The \$193 million for the program was eliminated when the bill was reported out by the Appropriations Committee. But when the measure came to the floor on Aug. 2, the money was restored in a 224-204 vote. On Aug. 3, in a raucous session, the House passed a measure that would deny Medicaid funding of abortions even to victims of rape or incest—two of the conditions, together with danger to the life of the mother, under which most pro-life Republicans have said they would allow abortion. Tensions were so high, that Gingrich had to lead a "T-group session," in which both sides were allowed to air their grievances, in order to bring about some semblance of unity. Ironically, a day later, the Senate voted 50-44 to maintain abortion coverage in federal employee health plans in cases of rape, incest, or in which the mother's life is endangered.

No one is more aware of the problems entailed by this "house divided" than Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole

(R-Kan.), who is attempting to unify the party around his presidential candidacy. Aware of the new-found strength of the Republican Right, Dole is attempting to trim his sails accordingly. Having earlier refused to sign a "no new taxes" pledge, Dole this year signed an anti-tax pledge. Although more of a "deficit hawk" than a tax-cutter, Dole is now championing tax cuts as a panacea for economic problems and government "excesses."

The dichotomy in the Republican Party is nowhere more marked than in the jockeying for the Republican presidential nomination between Dole and Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.). The Republican stalking-horse of "welfare reform" has served as the most recent focus of the Dole-Gramm fight.

A welfare reform proposal has already moved through the House. It contains all the shibboleths of the conservative agenda: It would turn over welfare to the states, with strict requirements to deny aid to teenage mothers, legal immigrants, many disabled children, people on the rolls for more than five years, and those adults who won't work.

In the Senate, Dole has put forward a similar but not so mandatory proposal. The Dole legislation would end the guarantee that poor Americans are entitled to welfare benefits, and would farm out the money and the responsibilities to the states in the form of lump-sum grants. But in Dole's proposal, it is left up to each state to decide how draconian the restrictions will be, and who gets the benefits and who doesn't. President Clinton immediately criticized this approach, saying it was a "very bad idea" to give states block grants without a federal requirement that they use the money for welfare.

Gramm was not happy with this "passing the buck" to state discretion. Gramm attacked the proposal as "token" welfare reform, claiming that the majority leader was still proposing to "pay welfare recipients more money to have more children." Always eager to cozy up to the Christian Coalition, whose votes he hopes to win in his presidential bid, Gramm said that he wanted to "strengthen" the Dole legislation, i.e., to shape it more in conformity with the Conservative Revolution agenda. Gramm would force states to take away money from recipients who don't work, and cut off funding to unwed mothers under 18 and to welfare mothers who have additional children, and to legal immigrants. At last count, Dole had 33 sponsors for his bill; Gramm had 26.

With Democrats opposed to both bills and with Gramm-supporter Sen. Lauch Faircloth (R-N.C.) threatening to filibuster the bill unless the Gramm amendments were added, the situation had become a "Mexican stand-off." On Aug. 8, Dole took the legislation off the Senate agenda, postponing any resolution until after the August recess.

How successful Dole will be in bringing his "house" in order has yet to be determined. That the fissures will become greater rather than less the more we get into the election season, is all but certain—as the feeling "back in the district" starts to take precedence over the Washington Beltway "theater of the absurd."