

## Elephants and Donkeys by Kathleen and Mel Klenetsky

### 'Passionate center' a Gingrich front?

Former Colorado governor Richard Lamm, who ignited a firestorm of controversy in 1984, when he called for the elderly to "die and get out of the way," has pulled together a group of fellow political has-beens with a view toward either forming a third party, backing an independent Presidential candidate, or, at the very least, influencing the policy debate of the 1996 elections in the direction of "fiscal conservatism" (read: destruction of living standards) and "social liberalism" (read: radical environmentalism and gay rights).

Founded last October, The Lamm Group—which styles itself as the "radical middle" or "passionate center"—originally consisted of seven once-prominent politicians: New Jersey Democrat Bill Bradley, who announced his retirement from the Senate last August; Gary Hart, the former Democratic senator and Presidential candidate; John Anderson, who ran for the Presidency in 1980 as an independent; former Rep. Tim Penny of Minnesota; ex-senator and ex-Presidential candidate Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts; former Connecticut governor Lowell Weicker; and Maine Gov. Angus King.

Members claim that the group's existence stemmed from dissatisfaction with President Clinton and the existence of a political vacuum. "There is a center in this country, whether you call it the passionate center, the radical center, the sensible center, that is basically socially inclusive, fiscally conservative, pro-environment, pro-campaign reform, and those people feel rather disenfranchised at this point," according to Tsongas. "We want to let both parties know that this constituency is a majority constituency. . . . If the

parties insist on remaining captive to their fringe elements, there will be a third party."

Based on the predilections of the group's members, it might as well be just another front for Newt Gingrich's "Contract on America." Tsongas, for example, ran for the Presidency in 1992 on a program that featured cutbacks in Social Security and Medicare, and now works with the budget-cutting Concord Coalition. Until he was defeated in 1994, Democrat Tim Penny was one of the most rabid cost-cutters in Congress.

It was no big surprise, then, that Newt Gingrich addressed by satellite a two-day gab fest the group convened in Minnesota just before Christmas.

*Washington Post* columnist Robert Kuttner accurately compared The Lamm Group to the Mugwumps of the 1880s. In a Dec. 26 column, Kuttner described the Mugwumps as the aristocratic liberals, who sought "procedural and administrative reforms," but "ignored the gross economic abuses" of their day. "Nothing in the [current] mugwump program addresses the great economic concerns that are making the electorate so disaffected," commented Kuttner. The kind of "austerity program" advocated by these latter-day Mugwumps "will only make the debt that much more of a burden."

Recently, several Lamm Group members, Bradley and Weicker among them, have dropped out, which has put something of a damper on the group, as did Colin Powell's decision not to seek the Presidency, since a number of the gang's members had wanted to jump on that bandwagon. It appears unlikely that the Lammers will go the third party route now; but what other mischief they may get up to in this election year remains to be seen.

### Whitman trolls in Presidential waters

New Jersey Gov. Christie Whitman's December endorsement of Sen. Bob Dole (R-Kan.) for the Republican Presidential nomination has fueled speculation that she may be angling for the vice-presidential slot. It's no secret that Whitman, who snatched the governorship from incumbent Democrat Jim Florio in the Republicans' 1994 electoral tidal wave, harbors national ambitions.

Since her election, the patrician Mrs. Whitman has become something of a GOP poster girl: Republican National Committee chairman Haley Barbour chose her, the only female Republican governor, to give the official GOP response to President Clinton's State of the Union address last year.

Although Whitman has publicly stated that she has no desire to go to Washington next year, and has suggested that Dole pick Colin Powell as his running mate, she nevertheless remains in contention.

With her aristocratic roots in New Jersey horse country, her support for abortion, feminism, environmentalism, and other elements of the social liberal agenda, the governor maintains strong appeal to the "Rockefeller" wing of the Republican Party, which Dole needs to win the nomination.

Whitman's aspirations may founder on the shoals of the New Jersey economy. She has pushed through her tax-cut campaign platform, which initially kept her popularity in her home state high. But now the consequences are coming home to roost: The state treasury has lost \$1.2 billion in revenue annually owing to the Whitman income tax cut, and with large-scale layoffs now hitting the state (AT&T is cutting 7,000 jobs alone), revenues will fall even further.