

GOP fractures over Gingrich's leadership

by Carl Osgood

For more than a week after the Republicans capitulated to President Clinton on the disaster relief bill, the major national press carried front-page stories on the fissure developing between House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and the rest of the House Republican leadership. Indeed, all of the leadership, including Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Tex.), Majority Whip Tom Delay (R-Tex.), Conference Chairman John Boehner (R-Ohio), Policy Committee Chairman Christopher Cox (R-Calif.), and Bill Paxon (R-N.Y.), who chairs the leadership meetings and is a personal protégé of Gingrich, all turned against Gingrich when the vote came up on the revised disaster bill on June 12. They were angry at the way Gingrich had brokered the deal that brought the revised bill to the floor, without a provision intended to prevent a government shutdown in the event that the appropriations bills are not finished at the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30.

While Armey and other GOP leaders go to great lengths, in public, to deny any rift between themselves and Gingrich, their anger spills out nonetheless. Armey, when asked about Gingrich as he was leaving a press conference on June 17, simply said, "Y'all have a nice day now." He told the *Washington Post* on June 18 that, with regard to the budget agreement, "If you're not in the room and you don't make the agreement, you're not bound by it." Afterward, Armey appeared more conciliatory, denying in a statement that he had refused to defend Gingrich, and saying on NBC's *Meet the Press* on June 22, that he supported Gingrich "enthusiastically."

The unhappiness with Gingrich among the Conservative Revolution crowd was signaled in an article by conservative columnist Fred Barnes in the June 30 issue of the *Weekly Standard*. Barnes gave reasons for each of the members of the top leadership to want Gingrich to step down as Speaker. Barnes reports that "Gingrich has deeply alienated each of his deputies by his decisionmaking and his behavior towards them."

The trail of internal dissension and mini-revolts stretches back to Gingrich's ethics problems and the vote to impose a \$300,000 fine on him, last January. While Barnes does not acknowledge the effects of the ethics scandal, it nonetheless severely weakened Gingrich's control of the Republican Caucus, which he had previously maintained even after the debacle of the government shutdowns in late 1995.

The next stop on the trail was the vote on committee funding in March. Eleven conservatives broke ranks with the leadership on a procedural vote, because they believed that the funding bill gave too much money to the committees. Gingrich gave in to their demands, and compromised on the funding issue. The eleven, led by Matt Salmon (R-Ariz.) and Joe Scarborough (R-Fla.), later charged Appropriations Committee Chairman Bob Livingston (R-La.) with "blacklisting" them by reducing appropriations for Federal operations in their districts. Livingston, apparently, did not deny the charge.

Then came the confrontation with Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Bud Shuster (R-Pa.), after the May 2 budget agreement was inked between Clinton and the Republicans. Shuster fired off an angry letter to Gingrich complaining that the budget deal left transportation projects underfunded by not providing enough spending, and by using the transportation trust funds to paper over the budget deficit, an accounting trick that Shuster has always been opposed to. Gingrich agreed to let Shuster bring to the floor an alternative to the budget resolution. According to Barnes, Gingrich didn't consult with Armey, who had already told Shuster his bill would not get a vote, because it would bust the budget deal. Shuster's bill was narrowly defeated by two votes, on a vote which split the Republicans, but only after a "Herculean" lobbying effort by Armey and Delay.

The 'final fracture'

Then came what Barnes describes as the "final fracture" between Armey and Gingrich, the disaster bill. According to Barnes, Gingrich agreed to bring the bill to the floor without the government shutdown provision, but without consulting Armey or Delay, both of whom regarded the deal as a "total capitulation" to Clinton. After the vote, they saw Gingrich as pushing the blame onto them. However, the strategy of confrontation with the President, whoever was the architect of it, made other conservatives nervous. Budget Committee Chairman John Kasich (R-Ohio) said on June 15 on CBS's "Face the Nation" that, even though he didn't understand why Clinton would be opposed to that provision, "when the President indicated he wasn't going to sign that, we shouldn't have attached it. . . . We should have sent him a clean flood bill. We should have gotten it done right off the bat."

While internal dissension among Senate Republicans has not surfaced, Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) has been exhibiting signs of stress. Appearing on ABC's "This Week with David Brinkley" on June 15, Lott took the high ground, focussing on the GOP's favorite populist issue, tax cuts. He claimed that Clinton "is not committed to giving working Americans, middle class Americans a tax cut." He called Clinton a "spoiled brat" because "he thinks he's got to have it his way or no."

The lesson the Republicans have failed to learn, is that being the majority in Congress, does not mean they control the government.