

Elephants and Donkeys by Stephen Pepper

Congress routed by computer

The Democrat and Republican members of the House were in retreat this past weekend. Peter Dooley Finne, that turn of the century sage, would probably have remarked, "Retreat hell! It was a rout!" The subject was supposed to be "getting our act together for the coming budget battle," but it was actually an abject surrender to the Gramm-Rudman rule of the computer.

Even though many of the members were roasted by their constituents over the recess, and they know the budget process as defined by the new law is unconstitutional, even in the narrowest interpretation, very few, if any, really have the courage to fight it. In fact, almost all discussion focused on learning to live with it.

For example, freshman congressman Beau Bolter, (R-Tex.) reported, "I am hearing in the district that people wanted us to make the decisions as a responsible congress, to distinguish between good programs and bad ones. The intent was never to surrender immediately to the meat-cleaver—the automatic sequestering process. The Democrats want to have this automatic meat-cleaver go into effect, and then blame the Republicans. I am introducing a resolution on Monday for the Congress to comply with the limits set

under Gramm-Rudman, to direct budgetary savings, without sequestration."

Rep. Tom Taukey (R-Iowa) added that the automatic enforcement already in effect was widely viewed as the failure of Congress.

On the other side was that "gopher of free enterprise," Richard Arney (D-Tex.), who claimed that his budget commandoes, known as Arney's army, will lead the way in the fight to take control by stripping the budget before Gramm-Rudman. Arney is an enthusiast of "privatization," who until recently slept two days a week in the House gym to save money. The Gym's executive recently evicted him, on the grounds that it was for the private not the household use of the members.

The consequence of the insanity and panic that is now spreading through congressional ranks was reflected in the remarks of Bob Walker. He said that Republican strategy must be to make every vote on every bill a vote on balancing the budget, to propose amendments on each and every bill, which will make it into that, and to force "an entire redefinition of the national agenda." He suggested that when the Democrats propose this week that the nation buy a new shuttle, the GOP should propose that private industry should pay for it instead. "We need to make NASA reform. They'll resist it, but we have to force them to change the way they operate."

This idea that NASA can become essentially a management consultant to private industry indicates the depth to which the Republicans have fallen. Presumably, if private enterprise decided that going to Mars was not cost effective, but a quick shuttle bus to the Moon would run in the black, that would determine our priorities. It is simply unacceptable to surrender national priorities to a private agenda.

The Republican strategy was summed up by Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and pollster Robert Teeter. The former declared that the way to force cuts was to get the President to agree to an omnibus appropriations bill (instead of several covering different departments, as was the case this past year). Otherwise the Republicans should agree on a budget immediately that will in effect accomplish Gramm-Rudman.

The latter advised Republicans not to talk so much about painful cuts. "If the economy holds, and its performance holds, we can avoid a real bad year in the elections." If prayers could work, the GOP would be in great shape, but reality is against them.

And what of the Democrats? What is the self-styled opposition up to? Well, a report filed by the *Washington Post* on Feb. 4 gives the best indication of the Democrats' state of readiness.

Headlined, "Democrats Resort to Good Life for Talks," the report continued, "The weekend was more social than political. . . . On Saturday night when the Democrats provided their own entertainment, they . . . had Gramm-Rudman on their minds. Rep. Dan Glickman sang an off-key melody of 'Fools on the Hill,' recounting passage of the bill. Rep. Martin Leath (Texas) dressed all in black . . . launched into a rendition of 'Let's Go Out in a Blaze of Glory, All Good Things Must End.' But the highlight was provided by three female lawmakers—Marcy Kaptur and Mary Rose Oakar of Ohio and Barbara Boxer of California. To the tune of 'The Way We Were,' they sang, 'Memories of the days before Phil Gramm, lovely budget spending memories, of the way they were.'"

I think one can agree that in comparison to the Democrats, the Republicans appeared to be veritable Solons.