

Leave Him Alone

by Byron York

Lately conservative political activists have been falling over each other in a rush to kill the presidential candidacy of Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole. One insider reports that anti-Dole whisperings dominate inside-the-Beltway gatherings, from Grover Norquist's breakfasts to Paul Weyrich's lunches to R. Emmett Tyrrell's dinners (and perhaps even between meals). The moderate Dole, the whispers say, doesn't stand a chance of being elected.

What to do? Favorites like Quayle, Bennett, Cheney, and Kemp aren't running—and conservatives can't seem to bear the man who woos them most ardently, Texas Senator Phil Gramm. Nor have they mustered much enthusiasm for any of the other politicians chasing the Republican nomination. So for the moment they've turned their attention to Colin Powell. After first revealing himself to be essentially a New Democrat, a sort of Clinton with character, Powell now appears to be tailoring his message to appeal to the right. Some of them are buying it. Why? It's impossible to answer that question without asking another: Why do they hate Bob Dole?

For years Dole has suffered from the label "moderate." He was too willing to make deals with Democrats. He didn't buy into supply-side in the early '80s. He voted to raise taxes in hopes of avoiding the horrendous deficits that came anyway. He was notoriously suspicious of ideologues at a time when ideologues came to dominate his party. How could a Reaganite true believer not hate him?

At the same time the mainstream punditocracy has alternately embraced and vilified Dole. He was the GOP hatchet man of the '70s. In the '80s he became the voice of Republican reason who tried to talk sense into those Reagan zealots. Later, when Clinton came to power, it was back to Bad Old Bob. Dole was "mean" and

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"cold" and lacked the compassion that Democrats had in such great supply.

But then Newt Gingrich burst into power. Now *here* was somebody the liberal press could hammer, and almost at once the daily parade of stories lamenting the rise of extremism focused on the new Speaker of the House. For liberals, Dole again became the bulwark against the radicals, this time the ones running the House. No more Mr. Mean.

That was the last straw for Dole's conservative enemies. They've seen this happen before. They've always distrusted his moderation; now they *really* can't stand him, because the people they hate have again begun to like him.

But Dole needs conservative support. So, in one of the terrible rituals of politics, he is courting the activists who view him with contempt, signing their pledges, bashing Hollywood, and rejecting a donation from the Log Cabin Republicans. Dole seems resigned to doing it. As his hero, Richard Nixon, told him, "You have to run as far as you can to the right, because that's where forty percent of the people who decide the nomination are. And to get elected you have to run as fast as you can back to the middle, because only about four percent of the nation's voters are on the extreme right wing."

Maybe that's what it takes. Dole knows a presidential candidate has to knit together an almost impossible coalition of people with an almost impossible number of interests. So he pays lip service to some. It's a tradition. Does anyone remember Ronald Reagan denouncing abortion and then not doing too terribly much about it, beyond speaking—by phone, not in person—to the yearly Right-to-Life rally? Does anyone remember his straight-faced appeals for a Balanced Budget Amendment? Does anyone think Colin Powell or anybody else running for president *wouldn't* do the same sort of thing?

With so many people arrayed against him—except, so far, the voters—Dole seems to be slipping. But he goes on, fighting at age 72 for something he most likely won't ever get. How characteristic. Just read Richard Ben Cramer's astonishing portrait of the young Bob Dole in *What It Takes*.¹ Cramer describes Dole, grievously wounded in World War II, returning to Russell, Kansas in 1945. He couldn't move, had no feeling in most of his body, and lay for months in a body cast. Infections and blood clots almost killed him several times as 1945 passed, then 1946, then 1947. In those years, Dole often looked at the other disabled veterans in his hospital ward and struggled with a nightmare vision: "Sometimes," Cramer writes, "he could actually *see* himself on Main Street, Russell, in a wheelchair, with a cup." Later, when he got better, he worked days and nights pulling on ropes and weights set up in the backyard, trying to make his arm work again. His mother would say, "Bob, don't you want to rest?" but he would just keep on.

He is still pulling, although it is hard for an outside observer to know why. Certainly it is sometimes embarrassing and painful to see the price he's willing to pay to win, especially given the puny stature of some of his opponents. The current occupant of the White House, for example, has to peddle stories to a women's magazine about being in the room when his step-daddy took a pot-shot at his mama. Why, he could have been killed! That's not quite in the league of a genuinely courageous man like Dole.

But conservatives have no use for him. And that's a shame, because Dole's experience and skills—after all, he really *does* know how to make a deal—could be quite useful in the presidency. Who knows? A Dole White House and a Gingrich Congress might be the type of divided government a conservative could learn to love. □

¹ The Dole section of this 1992 book about six presidential contenders is now available in a new paperback edition entitled *Bob Dole* (Vintage Books, 165 pages, \$11).

Age and Guile Beat Youth, Innocence, and a Bad Haircut



1970

1. Loathes the government
2. Ridicules the establishment
3. Smokes illegal imported things (Thai buds)



1995

1. Loathes the government
2. Ridicules the establishment
3. Smokes illegal imported things (Montecristo coronas)

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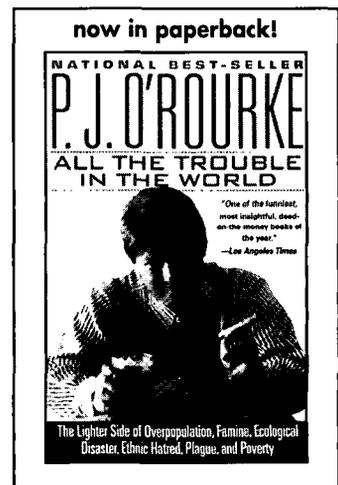


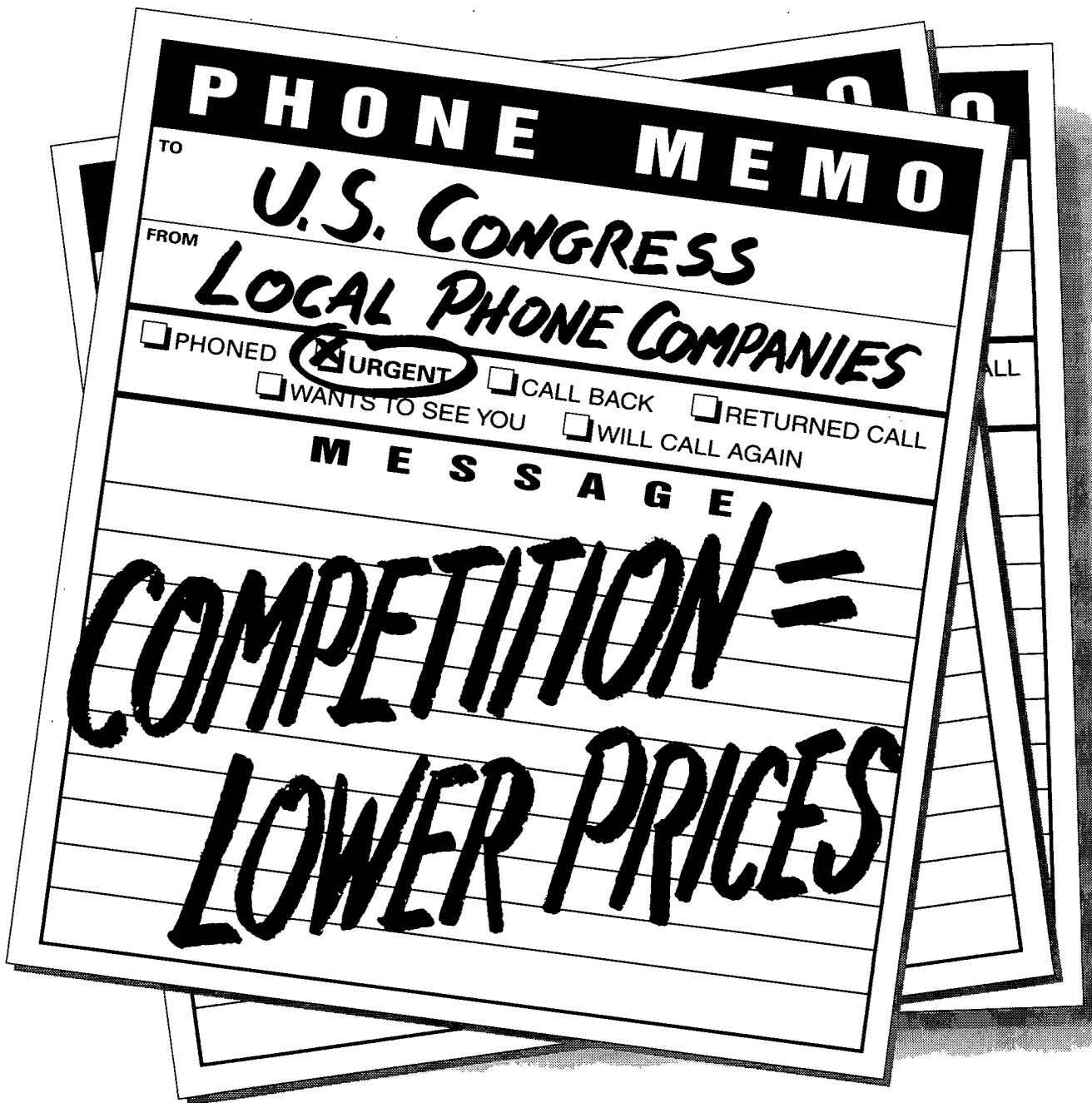
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