

# Washington Traps

By Virginia I. Postrel

## Why Republicans should be irresponsible and impolite.

**I** KNEW THINGS HAD CHANGED WHEN I saw Al D'Amato on *Nightline* and he started talking about privatizing air traffic control. Al D'Amato, heretofore a hack extraordinaire, had latched on to an esoteric free-market policy idea developed by...my boss.

Then things got even weirder. I ordered a transcript of that *Nightline*, which I'd only seen the end of. And lo and behold, in between discussions of White-water subpoenas, this same Al D'Amato started ranting about how the government won't let you say "within walking distance" in real-estate ads. Now that's an esoteric regulatory issue nobody ever talks about in public—nobody that is except...me. (See last month's editorial or various newspaper columns.)

When Al D'Amato has to bone up on substance—and Ted Koppel solicits his opinions on spending cuts and regulatory reform—something has definitely changed. And when a porkbarrel pol like D'Amato appears to be getting his ideas from REASON, we have entered a whole new world.

Or so it has seemed since November 8.

A year ago, the Clintons were getting ready to nationalize health care, Bob Dole was rushing to help, and Newt Gingrich was murmuring support. The only members of Congress you could count on to defend freedom over Clintonite "security" were economists from Texas, one for each house. Now Dick Armey is going to be House majority leader and Phil Gramm is all over television drawing such heretical sentiments as, "Why should we want to go halfway in the wrong direction?"

Why, indeed? And yet, until recently, that was exactly the plan. Which is why,

despite a certain giddy delight at the triumph of people who speak the language of limited government, I'm not convinced. The culture of Washington is desperately trying to reassert itself, and the Republican upstarts should beware its traps.

**T**HE MOST DANGEROUS IS THE "RESPONSIBILITY" trap. Here's how Sen. John Breaux (D-La.) explains it: "It's easy to be a critic. I mean, Sam Rayburn said that any jackass could kick down the barn, but it takes a real carpenter to build one... [W]hen you see the Republicans having the responsibility of governing, it's going to be different."

But "responsibility" in Washington doesn't mean living up to your commitments, sticking to your principles, or bearing the consequences of your actions. It means not rocking the boat. It means minding your manners. It means treating government like a dinner party.

Washington's governing class has two basic modes of behavior: campaign mode and dinner party mode. In campaign mode, you're allowed to say just about anything about your opponent, no matter how nasty. But everyone knows that it's all a game, that the rough rhetoric is for the benefit of the voters. It isn't serious.

When the campaigns are over, Washington enters dinner party mode—often literally. At a dinner party, the polite guest will avoid confrontations with his or her fellows. Three days after the election, when I found myself seated at a table full of reeling academics, we discussed such safe questions as whether easy absentee voting would increase turnout. It was the political equivalent of small talk.

That's fine for a real dinner party. But Washingtonians apply the same notions of politeness outside the dining room. A year ago, they were rolling their eyes at the uncouthness of Gramm's and Armey's op-

position to ClintonCare. Now they're baffled at what Gingrich might mean by, "I am very prepared to cooperate with the Clinton administration. I am not prepared to compromise."

If Gingrich is responsible, really, he'll stick to that promise amid the inevitable cries of "gridlock." Such cries can be intimidating in a town where most people honestly believe that Congress is like a widget factory—that its productivity depends on how many new laws it passes.

The great advantage of the Republican Contract With America is that it gives the new Congress lots of laws to pass—laws that, on the whole, roll back government. And if the Republicans want to give Bill Clinton brain lock, they can send him even more bills that will be popular with the public while offending Democratic interest groups: to limit the Endangered Species Act and federal wetlands regulation and pay affected landowners compensation; to abolish the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting; to scale back the Americans with Disabilities Act; even to force the Postal Service to refund postage on undelivered mail.

Washington has still more traps for the Republicans, however. They could lose sight of long-term policy in a quest for short-term political scalps; his *Nightline* appearance notwithstanding, D'Amato still cares more about scandal than privatization. They could buy into new poll-driven "crises," like the alleged demand for health-care reform. They could try to please constituent groups, notably the religious right, with divisive social legislation rather than broadly popular economic reforms. They could decorate the tax code with new loopholes, making a future flat tax difficult to pass and disruptive to people's plans. They could blink when faced with the consequences of their plat-

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## EDITORIALS

form—the laid-off Hill staffer or the former welfare mother who can't find work. They could be embarrassed by characterizations of their supporters as “angry white males” or “business.”

Some of their allies, and most of their enemies, would make the best the enemy of the good, blocking any talk of cutting taxes or spending until the Republicans introduce a complete overhaul of Social Security. They would be wise to hold off; after a couple more years of having Sam

Donaldson, Bob Kerrey, and Alice Rivlin beg for Social Security cuts, a new Congress might actually be able to pass them without facing an armed revolt.

“Let's Make Welfare as Hard to Get as a Building Permit,” goes the bumper sticker, and welfare is only half that story. The public is tired of being bossed around. For the Republicans to succeed, they'll have to remember that—especially when Washington starts telling them to be “responsible.”

## Sobriety Test

By Rick Henderson

### How to tell if the GOP is serious about shrinking government.

**A**SSESSING THE REPUBLICAN Electoral sweep on Washington's *Fox Morning News* November 10, Texas Sen. Phil Gramm said voters “didn't send us here to raise taxes half as much as Bill Clinton, increase spending half as much as Bill Clinton, or increase regulations half as much as Bill Clinton.” Gramm will try to set himself apart from other presidential contenders with an unapologetic, fiscally conservative agenda. But will Gramm's stances position him at the center of his party or on its fringes? Here are several issues the Republicans must confront if they want to be considered serious government cutters:

- **Tax fairness.** Rep. Dick Arme, the likely House majority leader, wants to replace the current loophole-ridden Internal Revenue Code with a 17-percent flat-rate tax and allow large standard exemptions. Arme's plan would end the use of the tax code as a tool of income redistribution and behavior modification and would restore its appropriate purpose—raising money to operate the federal government.

Arme's tax revolution won't happen overnight. But Republicans could simultaneously fulfill one plank of their Contract With America and launch a preemp-

tive strike for Arme's tax crusade by cutting the tax on capital gains to 17 percent and indexing the gains so that inflation doesn't penalize persons who hang onto their investments.

- **Budget reform.** Since 1974, Congress has used “baseline budgets.” The Congressional Budget Office projects how much federal agencies will spend over the next five fiscal years, building in increases. When spending rises by less than the CBO projects, Washington insiders declare that a spending “cut.”

For the past five years, Rep. Chris Cox (R-Calif.) has called for an end to baseline budgeting. Instead, he wants Congress to prepare a one-page budget spelling out how much the government can spend in each of the 19 budget categories. If Congress spends more money in one category than the budget allows, the president can rescind spending until the target is met. And when the budget is up for renewal, if Congress doesn't pass an appropriations bill for an agency, that agency can spend only as much as it did the previous year.

Incoming House Speaker Newt Gingrich promises an end to baseline budgeting. Cox's proposal would further brake spending growth.

- **Spending cuts.** In 1993, Ohio Rep. John Kasich and Republicans on the Budget Committee proposed a five-year program that would cut \$479 billion in spend-