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Abstract
Noah M. Weiss, College '09, History

"A campaign promise is one thing, a signed pledge is quite another": A Political History of the 1994 Republican Revolution

January 4, 1995, signaled a momentous change in American politics as Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-MO) handed the gavel of the House of Representatives to the newly elected Speaker of the House, Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-GA). For the first time in four decades, Republicans constituted a majority of the House. This research will examine the 1994 U.S. midterm elections, the so-called Republican Revolution, in which 54 seats changed hands. Was the Republican landslide truly a revolution? And, was it fundamentally a triumph of ideas or of partisan politics? To answer these questions, I will examine Republican strategy, the formulation of the "Contract with America," the Democratic Party’s response, the Contract’s legislative implementation, and finally the stalling of the Revolution with the government shutdowns of 1995–1996.

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THE REPUBLICAN REVOLUTION?

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APRIL 2009

2008–2009 PENN HUMANITIES FORUM
UNDERGRADUATE MELLON RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP
To My Family, Friends, and All Those Who Inspire Me
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It is fair to say that I had no idea what I was getting into when I applied for the History Honors Program from my dorm room in Barcelona. Perchance taken by the freedom that one feels in such a magical place, I sent in my proposal and was accepted. I have never looked back.

The process has been filled with its ups and downs; yet, its vicissitudes have only driven me to work harder. I could always see the light at the end of the tunnel, though at many points it seemed the tunnel would never end. In an odd way, my thesis took me on an adventure—traveling to interviews and archives, meeting new friends, and pushing myself harder than ever before. In that, perhaps, the spirit of Barcelona still lives.

There are several people without whom I would have never been able to finish, and whom I would therefore like to acknowledge here. First, I would like to thank Professor Sarah Igo. Without her trust in me, I might have abandoned my topic months ago. Second, I am grateful to Professor Kristin Stromberg-Childers for her care, understanding, and perspective. Although, by her own admittance, she didn’t know much about my topic, her detached point of view and her ability to keep me grounded was enormously helpful. Finally, I would like to thank my primary advisor, Professor Bruce Kuklick for his cutting wit, big-picture thinking, and incredible speed in reviewing my work. Each step of the way, his comments and criticisms have pushed me to think about the larger implications, or what he termed “conscience questions.” My thesis would not be the same without them.

I would also like to thank my interview subjects for sharing their time and experiences with me. Even in an election year, they fit me into their schedules and for that I
am very grateful. One of the big draws of this topic was the opportunity to interview some of the era’s characters, and their experiences and stories never disappointed my expectations.

One of the great joys of the last year has been working on my thesis with such an amazing group of people, my fellow American history honors students. Whether it was bouncing ideas off of each other, keeping each other motivated, or just getting to know them as people, they have been an incredible network of friends. I wish them all the best. I know we will keep in touch.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their unyielding support throughout the past year. Many read and edited parts of my draft, provided suggestions, and gave me encouragement. Their support has meant the world.

Noah M. Weiss
Philadelphia, PA
April 28, 2009
INTRODUCTION:

A REVOLUTION?

On January 4, 1995, as Rep. Richard Gephardt, Democrat of Missouri, handed the gavel of the House of Representatives to the newly elected Speaker of the House, Rep. Newt Gingrich, Republican of Georgia, it was clear that a momentous change had occurred in American politics. For the first time in four decades, Republicans comprised a majority of the House of Representatives after winning a sweeping victory in the 1994 elections in which fifty-four seats changed party hands from the Democrats to the Republicans. In fact, not a single member of the GOP had ever seen a Republican majority, save Congressman Bill Emerson of Missouri who had been a sixteen year old page during the 83rd Congress in 1954.

Just two years prior, this sea change would have been inconceivable. After twelve years of Republican presidents, Democratic Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas had captured the White House. Democrats had held onto control of both houses of Congress yet again. The Republican Party was fractured; by the thousands, registered Republicans bolted the party in 1992 to support third party candidates like Ross Perot or just decided to stay at home on Election Day, disillusioned by a party that they felt no longer represented their interests and ideas.

Nevertheless, following the 1994 elections, Republicans would control both chambers of Congress for the next twelve years, instituting policies that departed considerably from the norms set during four decades of Democratic rule. Undeniably, many of the issues that the Clinton Administration had introduced—welfare reform, for example—were still on the table, but after the 104th Congress took office, the emphasis shifted in a decidedly Republican
direction. Even Democrats recognized this fundamental shift. In his 1996 State of the Union Address, President Clinton famously declared, “The era of big government is over,” paying homage to a central theme in the Republican ideology—reducing the size and scope of the federal government.

The Republicans came to Congress in 1995 intending to consummate a revolution. In the words of their Contract with America, they meant “to restore the bonds of trust between the people and their elected representatives” and to end “government that is too big, too intrusive, and too easy with the public’s money.” Their success was mixed, and their claim of a full revolution is overstated, but nevertheless in a sense the Republicans truly shifted the national debate and revolutionized the way campaigns are run and majorities govern. The Republican Revolution may just be catchy alliteration, but, as we will see, the Republican Party was genuinely able to make decisive change in Washington, both good and bad.

The Republicans did not become a majority overnight. Indeed, the story of how the GOP came to capture their first majority in the House of Representatives in four decades is certainly not limited to the two years between 1992 and 1994. Rather, the success of the Republicans would have never been possible without the dramatic transformation that occurred within the House Republican Party in the 1980s and early 1990s. The party matured during this era, changing its attitude from passive to active, and adopted a style of partisan politics aimed at forcibly making themselves a majority. The internal transformation of the House Republicans was essential to put themselves in a position to win the majority in 1994.

As such, this thesis aims to examine the developments behind the so-called Republican Revolution of 1994 with specific emphasis on the long-term maturation of the
Republican Party in the House of Representatives from a passive minority to an ambitious majority. I have chosen this focus because the House was where almost all of the important action took place; it was the driving force in campaign strategy and legislative goal setting. The crowning achievement of the House Republican leadership in these two areas was the Contract with America. The Contract was a ten point pledge, signed by 367 Republican Congressional candidates, detailing the actions that the Republicans would take in the first 100 days of the 104th Congress if they won a majority in the 1994 elections. The Contract included both government reform ideas (e.g. requiring all laws that apply to the rest of the country apply to Congress and opening committee meetings to the public) as well as major policy changes (e.g. tort reform, welfare reform, and a balanced budget constitutional amendment).

There are several historical questions I seek to answer. First, can the events of 1994 and 1995 truly be described as a revolution? It is obvious that 1994 was a significant political victory, but can the Republican win genuinely be said to have had lasting influence? Furthermore, I seek to examine several larger questions about the nature of Congress itself. How did the maturation of the House Republican Party affect majority-minority relations, partisanship within Congress and congressional campaigns, the nature of congressional leadership, the balance of power between the White House and the Congress, and are these lasting changes?

Before beginning our history, however, I will take a moment to briefly sketch several overarching themes.
The House as a Majoritarian Institution

The House of Representatives is fundamentally a majoritarian institution. That is to say that a determined and cohesive majority party can impose its will on the institution as a whole. The majority party in Congress holds all the power. It organizes the Congress, elects the speaker, writes the House rules, and determines the organization of the committee system. Members of the majority are always the subcommittee and the full committee chairmen and the majority hires three times more committee staff members than the minority. Most importantly, the majority controls debate in the House. It decides the rules of debate, which bills come out of committee, which bills receive a vote, which bill may be amended and what type of amendments may be offered, and places time limits on the debate.

For its part, the minority party has extremely limited power, and can only act in its own right if it is supported by disaffected majority members. If confronted with a unified majority, the minority’s influence completely depends on the whims of the majority.

The tradition in the modern House of strong majority rule dates back to the adoption of Reed’s Rules in 1890. Throughout his entire career in the House, whether he was at the time serving in the majority or minority, Rep. Thomas Brackett Reed (R-ME) advocated for stronger majority rule, and upon becoming speaker in 1889, pushed through a complete overhaul of the House rules that significantly curtailed minority power. One of the most powerful representatives to have ever served as speaker, Reed was once supposedly asked by a constituent to send him a copy of the House rules, to which the speaker replied by sending an autographed photo of himself. A man characterized by his acerbic wit, Reed was notoriously contemptuous of the minority. Once asked by a Democratic member, “What is
the function of the minority?” “The function of the minority, sir,” Reed replied, “is to make a quorum and to draw its pay.”

The majoritarian tendencies of the House endure to this day, and in a legislative body that severely curtails minority power, natural tension exists between the majority and the minority. As we will see, the House Republicans in the 1980s were able to harness this tension in an effort to galvanize its members into more activist positions and behaviors. Furthermore, the strengthening of majority rule by Reed and in the years since enabled the Republicans, once they gained a majority in the 104th Congress, to act quickly and efficiently in implementing their Contract with America.

**Partisanship in the House**

Intricately bound with the majoritarianism of the House of Representatives is the existence of partisanship. The relationship is understandably complex. Although partisanship does not necessarily follow from majority rule, majority rule provides the motivation and ability to exert partisan control. For example, if a majority wants to ram through a bill that the minority does not like, it may do so by taking advantage of the instruments of majority rule, especially by setting restrictive debate rules that offer no opportunity to alter a bill (a so-called closed rule). Even in writing legislation, if a majority decides to exclude the minority from the bill writing process, it can do so since it only takes a simple majority to report a bill to the House floor.

On the other hand, partisanship becomes an attractive option for the minority, since often it serves as the only way for minority members to gain attention or influence. Although minority parties cannot prevail in the long-term over the will of the majority, partisan tactics
can provide a significant thorn in the side of the majority, and can be very effective in galvanizing support among minority members to resist the will of the majority for as long as possible or to make the majority’s victory a Pyrrhic one.

The 1980s marked a significant increase in partisanship in the House on the part of the Democratic majority and the Republican minority. As we will see, the Democratic majority, feeling threatened by Ronald Reagan and defecting Democrats within their own caucus, increased the use of partisan tactics such as closed rules and other methods to strengthen their power. On the other hand, a group of backbench Republicans, led by Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-GA), used raw partisan tactics to polarize the House and transform the Republican minority into a more confrontational party, an attitude these members believed would be better suited for winning a majority.

Of course, this increased partisanship in the House brings up the normative question: is partisanship in and of itself a bad thing or is it a legitimate means to an end? If the latter, to what end, and does the achievement of this end inhibit other, more beneficial ones?

**The Party Leadership and the Committee System**

The House is organized into about two dozen committees, where the typical work of writing and shaping legislation is done. Each committee is divided into several subcommittees and a member of the majority party chairs each full and subcommittee. Chairmanships are normally assigned by seniority. Once legislation is reported out of committee, it goes to the Rules Committee to decide what rules of debate the full House will use in considering the legislation. The ratio of members of the majority and minority party within the committees will generally match the ratio in the full House, with one exception;
the Rules Committee, since it is imperative for the majority party to impose the rule it wants, usually holds a 2 to 1 ratio of seats for the majority.

The committee system is complemented by the party leadership. Each party has a leader and a whip, as well as other elected or appointed offices. The leader of the majority party is the Speaker of the House. The role of these leaders is to ensure that the party’s agenda is carried out on the House floor. They have several tools at their disposal, including the ability to control floor debate, the whip system to count votes, and decide which of their members sit on which committees.

Over the history of the House, power has oscillated between the committee chairmen and the leadership. Beginning in the 1970s, power started to shift away from committee chairmen and toward the leadership as a way of centralizing power and ensuring that party goals were achieved. When the Republicans took control of the House in 1995, they had been out of power for so long that there were no real power bases that the leadership had to be wary of in assigning committee chairmanships. Therefore, Newt Gingrich was able to use extraordinary power in handpicking committee chairmen and bypassing the usually rigid seniority system. Indeed, one of the great changes of the 104th Congress was the increased power of the leadership over the committee system through the creation of taskforces and advisory panels appointed by the leadership to circumvent the committee system.

**Congressional Elections**

The conventional wisdom pre-1994 on congressional elections closely followed former House Speaker Tip O’Neill’s (D-MA) maxim, “All politics is local.” Candidates for Congress generally ran very locally-focused campaigns, emphasizing what they had done for
the district. National issue rarely played a significant role in these races, except for in clearly extraordinary circumstances (the Democratic sweep in the 1930 elections, in the doldrums of the Great Depression, comes to mind first).

The Republicans were able to turn this conventional wisdom on its head by nationalizing the 1994 elections, choosing to run against the unpopularity of President Clinton (who, incidentally, was not on the ballot) and to collectively endorse a national platform, the Contract with America, which solely consisted of national issues. The friction between local and national issues, and by extension, between voters’ abstract disdain for Washington and their appetite for programs that directly benefit them, would prove to be a tricky dichotomy for both Republicans and Democrats to manage.

**Revolution**

In the modern sense, defining what is meant by revolution is extremely complex. Our notions today are not what they once were and our criteria no longer solely encompass armed upheavals. In the modern definition of revolution, wholesale and widespread social and political change in which the new order does not resemble the old is not the only type of revolution that qualifies. If it were, short-lived revolutions that cause no immediate change would not make the grade. And who would argue that the Revolution of March 1848 did not put Germany on the road to unification, although historians are in agreement that by the following decade the Revolution had made little impact?

One of the most common definitions, that revolutions are events that have lasting impact, also is not by itself sufficient. Indeed, the original notion of a revolution, coming from the Latin *revolutio* for “a turn around,” seems to suggest that revolutions can begin and
end at the same place, much like the cosmological usage of the term to indicate the Earth making a full rotation around its axis or a planet one full “revolution” around the sun.

In his *Politics*, Aristotle demarcated two types of revolutions: those in which complete change occurs from one constitution to another and those in which an existing condition is modified. He wrote, “Hence the changes which take place may be of two kinds according to whether they involve a complete change from one constitution to another, or only a modification on an existing one. Examples of the former are from democracy to oligarchy...or the reverse. In the other case those who seek change wish the existing constitution to continue but want it to function through themselves.”

When discussing the Republican Revolution, it is obvious that it does not fit under the first requirement, but what about the second?

It is with these ideas about revolutions in mind that I evaluate the Republican Revolution. How sudden or momentous was it? How dramatic was its change? What were its lasting consequences? And if it was a revolution, where did this revolution take place? In the institution of Congress? In policymaking? In legislation? In campaigns and elections?

As we will see, when the Republicans took control of Congress in 1995, they indeed were able to bring about revolutionary change, albeit one that was short-lived in some places but lasting in others. Though widespread change did not last, and the revolutionary zeal waned as the Republican majority became more entrenched in power, the Republicans shifted the direction of the country in a decidedly center-right direction. The Republicans came to Washington intending to put into practice the vision that Ronald Reagan articulated but never accomplished.
A Note on Sources

A significant portion of this thesis is based on interviews conducted in the summer and fall of 2008 with key figures in the history of this era, including current and former congressmen, staff members, pollsters, and consultants. Where I have taken direct quotations from the interviews, I have noted the specific interview in the text; however, other information gleaned from my interviews appears without citation.

Throughout the process of researching this thesis, I have been wary of the potential pitfalls of interview material. The relationship between history and memory is a fickle one, and can be confounded further by the natural biases that many of my interview subjects have toward the era, especially since many of them played key roles and continue to judge the events from their particular points of view.

To combat this, I have taken every precaution to verify information given to me with other sources. Every person I interviewed was asked a set of base questions, and the differences in their answers provided some insight into where further verification would be necessary. Especially helpful in this endeavor have been contemporary newspaper articles from the era as well as numerous journalistic and political science texts. Although no genuinely historical text deals specifically and solely with the events I relate and analyze here, especially at the same level of detail, several more sweeping narratives have been helpful in placing the development and maturation of the House Republican Party from 1980-1995 in historical context.
Chapter Breakdown

This thesis is broken into four roughly chronological chapters, each dealing with a different aspect of the development and maturation of the House Republican Party. Chapter 1 focuses on the party in the 1980s and its transformation from a passive to an active minority party. This chapter also traces the rise of Newt Gingrich from a backbench member to his entrance into the leadership and describes and examines the vehicles and strategies he used to gain power.

Chapter 2 concentrates on the House Republicans during the Bush and early Clinton presidencies. Here, I examine the first missteps of Clinton and the continued entrance of activist members into the Republican House leadership. This combination sets the stage for Chapter 3, which covers the development of the Contract with America, the failure of the Clinton healthcare plan, and the 1994 campaign.

Chapter 4 focuses on the transition to and the first 100 days of the 104th Congress, as Republicans moved to take control of the House and implement their Contract with America. Chapter 4 concludes with a brief discussion of the stalling of the Republicans’ momentum with the two government shutdowns in late 1995 and early 1996. Finally, my epilogue ties the various themes introduced here and throughout the four chapters together and evaluates the lasting legacy of the Republicans in this era.
CHAPTER 1:

TRANSFORMING AN ATTITUDE

On September 15, 1980, Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan and over 150 House and Senate candidates gathered on the steps of the Capitol in Washington to outline a five point agenda that they promised to pursue if the voters gave them control of the White House and Congress, both of which were under Democratic control. Their hope was to provide the American electorate with a clear choice that November, and to show that the Republican Party would be united in delivering on their promise. Speaking grandly of “shared goals, shared responsibilities, and shared visions for the country,” Reagan drew a contrast between his own party and the Democrats, whose bickering during the administration of Jimmy Carter had become legendary: “Each of us here pledges that if elected we will begin working the day after election as a solid, unified team, and we pledge that within a year from today we will achieve five major goals for America.”

The congressional leaders in charge of planning the event hailed it as historic. The “Capitol Steps Event,” as it soon became known, was the brainchild of Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-GA), a freshman congressman who was the head of the long-term planning branch of the National Congressional Campaign Committee (NRCC), a title that carried no staff, no influence, and no power. Although the event was decried by Senate Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D-WV) as “another cotton candy media event,” Gingrich was confident that Reagan’s coattails could bring Republicans a majority in Congress, something they had not enjoyed since 1954.
Although the Reagan campaign hardly took the Capitol Steps Event seriously and the promises made there would be quickly forgotten, the ceremony had substantial significance for junior GOP congressman like Gingrich.\(^5\) They believed that this was the first step toward achieving the one thing that had eluded the GOP for almost three decades: a majority in the House of Representatives.

Indeed, by 1980, the Republican Party had already dwelt in the minority for twenty-six years, ten years longer than any other previous minority party. In fact, between 1931 and 1980, Democrats had controlled the House for all but the four years of the 80\(^{th}\) and 83\(^{rd}\) Congresses. Both times, the Republican majority had been fleeting. The vast Republican gains made in 1946 at the nadir of President Harry Truman’s popularity were wiped out just two years later when the Democrats picked up seventy-five seats to return them to a substantial majority. Then, the Republican majority brought to power by President Dwight Eisenhower’s coattails and Truman’s dismal approval ratings in 1952 was also quickly swept away two years later partly as a result of the public backlash toward the Army-McCarthy Hearings.

A former history professor, Newt Gingrich had first run for Congress in 1974, taking on Rep. John J. Flint (D-GA), a twenty-year incumbent and ardent segregationist. Although Gingrich lost his two races against Flint, in 1974 and 1976, his status as a promising challenger taking on an unsavory incumbent attracted notice from the Washington establishment, including *Washington Post* political reporter David Broder.\(^6\) When Flint retired in 1978, Gingrich seemed to be a shoo-in for the seat and won it handily. Ever purposeful, Gingrich barely celebrated after his victory, instead flying directly to Washington and declaring “his intent to destroy Democratic control in the Capitol.”\(^7\)
A month before he was to take office, this ambition led him directly to the office of Rep. Guy Vander Jagt of Michigan, the chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC), the political arm of the House Republican Party. For three hours, Gingrich inundated Vander Jagt with ideas, hoping to convince him that the NRCC should set up a long term planning committee to plot the path to a Republican majority: “In those three hours, he absolutely boggled my mind,” Vander Jagt later recalled. “Totally boggled my mind. I said, ‘I’ll tell you what, I’ll make you the chairman of the NRCC task force to plan for a Republican majority.’ I’m not sure anybody could be so brash…I skipped him over 155 sitting Republicans to do it.”

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Nevertheless, the young, optimistic Gingrich faced a long, uphill battle to transform the House Republican Party into the majority. By 1980, the Republican Party had dwelt in the minority for so long that many of its members had simply accepted the fact that they would forever be relegated to second-class status.

It had not always been this way, of course. In the pre-World War II era, it was commonplace for the minority to just bide its time until it regained power. In the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, Republicans, though the minority, would often ally with conservative Southern Democrats (called “Boll Weevils”) to wield significant influence in crafting legislation. Writing about the period of the late 1960s, political scientist Charles O. Jones remarked, it sometimes “appeared that the Republicans were the majority and the Democrats the minority.” Then-Rep. Dick Cheney (R-WY) agreed: Because “there were enough Boll Weevil Democrats, we controlled the agenda on economic issues.”
In this era, committee chairmen and ranking minority members often worked hand-in-hand, with the ranking member often able to significantly influence legislation. In the words of one former GOP member, “To a junior Republican, there was something to look forward to, even if he wasn’t going to be in the majority. [Being ranking member] wasn’t the same as being chairman, but it was the next best thing.”\(^\text{12}\) The relationship between Wilbur Mills of Arkansas, the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee from 1957 to 1975, and John Byrnes of Wisconsin, the committee’s ranking member, exemplified this custom. Although he was one of the most powerful men in Washington, Mills “practiced the kind of bipartisan, consensus politics” that made a Republican member “feel like he was an important member of the committee from the start,” according to Barber Conable, a Republican member from New York who served on the committee with Mills. To Conable, Byrnes was the committee’s first sergeant and Mills was its commander, which, “in the Ways and Means Committee…constituted very effective leadership.”\(^\text{13}\)

For Republicans, the downside to this state of affairs was that it bred complacency. Many Republicans were simply content with working their way through the seniority system and gaining their own share of personal power, which led former Rep. Fred Grandy (R-IA) to joke, “The trouble with Republicans is they don’t have anything and they won’t share.”\(^\text{14}\) Republicans like Byrnes were reluctant to take risks on behalf of the party for fear that they would jeopardize the personal status they had already come to attain. Rep. Richard Armey (R-TX) succinctly summed up the relationship between the minority members and their Democratic chairmen: “I used to call it the dissertation syndrome. You live a crucial, critical part of your life where the most important person in the world for you to please is your...
dissertation adviser or supervisor. If he’s not happy, you’re dead. That’s what the Democratic chairmen were to a lot of our more senior guys.”

This “go-along-to-get-along” attitude was unacceptable to Gingrich and other young conservatives who blamed it for keeping Republicans out of the majority for decades. In his new position at the NRCC, Gingrich set out to change this attitude and the Capitol Steps Event was his first attempt. He seemed to be successful, as Republicans picked up thirty-four seats in the House and twelve in the Senate, gaining control of the upper body for the first time since the Eisenhower administration. Gingrich had a special reason to celebrate the GOP’s gains: six of the winning candidates stood with Reagan on that sunny September morning, a fact that Gingrich did not believe was inconsequential: “Say to yourself, What are the odds of these six guys, who all won their upsets, winning them without the kind of media attention that they got back home after having gone to the Capitol steps and standing next to Reagan…You can arguably make the case that that wouldn’t have happened.”

Although Gingrich’s account of the reasons behind their victories can be disputed, the idea of displaying a united Republican Party, a platform endorsed by candidates running in races all over the country, and a pledge to make good on their promises would be something that would stick with him for years to come, waiting to resurface at the appropriate moment.

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In the late 1970s, several changes occurred that would severely inhibit Republicans’ ability to influence legislation. First, as a result of post-Watergate reforms, committee sessions were opened to the public. Whereas, in the words of one Republican staffer, “in closed meetings, Republican members used to be able to cut a deal and drive the chairman,” public meetings meant that chairmen were under intense pressure to toe the party line. Even
more frustrating to Republicans was the fact that “Democrats on some committees started to make decisions at caucuses that were closed to the minority,” and, unsurprisingly, closed to the public.  

The make-up of the House Democratic Caucus was also changing. The 1974 elections brought seventy-five freshmen Democrats to the House, and these “Watergate babies,” as then-Majority Leader Tip O’Neill (D-MA) called them, quickly became a significant legislative bloc. The Watergate babies were a new kind of politician, one that had “never rung doorbells, or driven people to the polls, or stayed late stuffing envelopes at campaign headquarters,” according to O’Neill.  

Elected on a wave of discontent following Watergate and Vietnam, these freshmen wanted to get things done and get them done now. As O’Neill remembered, “New members once were seen and not heard, but now it seemed that even the lowliest freshman could be a power in the House. Almost before we knew it, there were 154 committees and subcommittees, each with his own chairman.”  

This led Rep. Morris Udall (D-AZ) to quip if you didn’t know a member’s name, you were on pretty safe ground if you addressed him simply as “Mr. Chairman.” Committee staff also ballooned 41 percent between 1972 and 1978. 

Along with the number of committees increasing, changes occurred in the committees themselves. First, the Democrats restored proxy voting in committees in 1975, which eliminated the Republicans ability to take advantage of Democratic absences. Second, as a result of a revolt against the powerful committee chairmen, much of the power in writing legislation shifted from the full committees to the subcommittees, which doubly hurt Republicans since subcommittee chairmen were generally more liberal than full committee
chairmen and party ratios on subcommittees tilted even more heavily toward the majority than full committees.\(^2^1\)

By the end of the 1970s, it was clear that the Republican Party had survived the Watergate scandal and now it was the Democrats who were in trouble with the voters. The problems of the Carter Administration—stagflation, a lagging economy, the country’s “malaise”—now had put the Democrats on the run. In the 1978 midterm elections, the public’s lack of confidence in the unified Democratic government cost the party twelve seats in the House and three in the Senate—not an unusually large total, but for a party that had clearly swept the last few national elections, it was an omen of trouble.

In 1980, the Democratic Party’s problems were compounded even further, as Ronald Reagan won a resounding victory over the incumbent Jimmy Carter and the GOP picked up control of the Senate. The House Democratic majority, 242-192, was the smallest in twenty-eight years. With the defection of conservative Southern Democrats, the Republicans could claim a working majority, especially with a popular new president. “The plain fact is that the House is Democratic, but only nominally,” Udall said. “Technically, I’ll be in control of one of the key House committees, but I won’t have the votes there or on the floor.”\(^2^2\)

With the party having lost the White House and the Senate, the Democratic majority in the House seemed to be the last bulwark against total capitulation to Ronald Reagan’s vision of government as the problem not the solution. With this in mind, centralized leadership, especially in as tough a partisan as House Speaker Tip O’Neill, came to the Democrats’ rescue. GOP Leader John Rhodes of Arizona had once called O’Neill “the most partisan man I have ever known and recounted an O’Neill warning: “Republicans are just going to have to get it through their heads that they are not going to write legislation!”\(^2^3\)
Under O’Neill’s direction, restrictive rules became the norm, limiting the time and substance of debate. The GOP’s power to offer amendments, move to recommit legislation, and raise points of order was restrained. Proxy voting was used to bottle up Republican bills in committee and even if they moved on in the process, the Rules Committee—controlled by the speaker—would report the bill with an unfavorable rule. In 1986, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) voiced a common belief on Capitol Hill: “If we have a unified Democratic position, Republicans are irrelevant.” Rep. Joe Moakley (D-MA) accurately expressed the Democratic attitude: “Hey, we’ve got the votes. Let’s vote. Screw you.”

Rep. Robert Walker (R-PA) explained the Republican plight: “Democratic rule in the House had grown increasingly arbitrary. When I first came to Congress [in 1976], there was pretty much full and free debate in the Congress. Normally there was the opportunity for the minority to offer any and all amendments that were germane to bills, for example. As the 1980s moved forward and particularly as the Reagan Administration became more successful with its programs, Democrats tended to shut down a lot of those opportunities. By the middle of the decade, they were relying heavily on closed rules for debate.” By fully exploiting majority powers, the Democrats stifled Republican opposition.

As another former member put it: “[At one time] you were looked upon by your colleagues on the other side of the aisle as first, a member of the House, second, as the member from [your state], and third, as a Republican. And that order has been reversed. Now the defining characteristic that labels everybody initially is party. If a member is a Republican, they don’t care much about him.”
The growing frustration that Republicans experienced beginning in the early 1980s began to shape the ways they viewed their relationship to the majority, and consequently made them more accepting of activism and confrontation as the decade progressed.

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Although Newt Gingrich now considers himself a disciple of Ronald Reagan, it was to Richard Nixon that the junior congressman turned in the fall of 1982 for advice on how to reenergize the House Republican Party. Ironically, Gingrich had gotten his start in national politics by working on the Nelson Rockefeller campaign in 1968, but he recognized that the former president was one of the party’s elder statesmen and a shrewd analyst of the political scene.

Despite the immense success that the Republican Party enjoyed in 1981—which led Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill to comment, “All in all, the Reagan team in 1981 was probably the best run political operating unit I’ve ever seen.”—by 1982 the political climate had dramatically changed. As a result of “a tight monetary policy pursued by the Federal Reserve Board and astronomically high interest rates,” the country slipped into a recession and by December 1981, 9 million Americans were unemployed. This gave the Democrats an opening to reclaim the offensive.

Just before Gingrich went to meet Nixon in New York, the GOP had suffered a dismal showing in the 1982 midterms, losing twenty-six seats in the House to almost wipe out the gains they had made on the coattails of President Reagan in 1980. Even more depressing for Gingrich, who wanted more than anything else to achieve majority status, was that the Reagan Revolution was beginning to lose its steam. “It was clear after the August break [in 1981] that the great wave of Reagan reforms was over and that they did not have a
second great wave [with which] they could build the same momentum,” Gingrich later recalled. Without the leadership of the White House, he feared, the House GOP would revert back to thinking like a permanent minority.

At their meeting, Nixon agreed with Gingrich’s assessment. The former president was concerned about the attitude of the Republican leadership regarding change, and, like Gingrich, he believed that “they had accepted the idea of being in a permanent minority status.”

“Change would not come easy,” Nixon counseled, but nor could one single person transform an institution the size of the House. Nixon had been first elected in the Republican landslide of 1946 and had twice within a decade seen the GOP lose its majority after only two years of control. If they were ever to regain a majority, “the House Republican Party had to become more interesting, more energetic and more idea-oriented,” Gingrich recalled Nixon telling him. He encouraged the junior congressman to go back to Washington and put together a team of committed activists who could develop an agenda of issues around which the party could rally.

Gingrich took Nixon’s advice to heart, and upon returning to Washington he began to recruit other activist members to join his quest to transform the Republican Party into the majority. He first approached Rep. Vin Weber, a Minnesota Republican who had been elected with Reagan in 1980 and who did not intend to spend his House career in the minority. “He came up to me one day,” Weber said. “We were not very close. He essentially asked me, ‘What are you doing next year—and for the next ten? I sort of laughed and said, ‘Nothing special.’”

By early 1983, Gingrich attracted a core group of members, including Robert Walker of Pennsylvania, Dan Lungren of California, Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, Dan Coats of
Indiana, Duncan Hunter of California, and Connie Mack of Florida. As Walker recalled, Gingrich “recruited activists one by one. He got about twelve of us meeting in his Longworth office working in a coordinated fashion.” The group took the name the “Conservative Opportunity Society” (COS), which was “carefully selected as the antithesis of what they were seeking to topple, the hated ‘liberal welfare state.’”

Although Nixon had recommended monthly meetings, Gingrich rejected that, instead deciding that meetings once a week were necessary to build up a rhythm of activism. “They met every Wednesday morning and plotted strategy aimed at the goal of taking control of the House.” In addition to meetings in the morning to plot the day’s strategy, the group would often hold mini-retreats on Saturdays to stay on top of, and ahead of, the issues of the day. As Walker remembered, “We’d come back to Washington on Saturdays and sit down for a whole morning to talk to people like Alvin Toffler, John Naisbitt, and others who were at the forefront of defining the information economy that was emerging. And so we developed an agenda that stayed focused on the idea that we were looking forward into the future. We didn’t simply want to debate the issues of the moment.”

Specifically, the group looked for wedge issues and magnet issues. As Gingrich explained, Republicans “must emphasize a wedge of issues that drive our opponents away from the American people, while having a secondary theme of magnet issues that attract the American people to us.” In a December 28, 1983 memo to Weber, Judd Gregg outlined the issues that the COS should emphasize during the next year, including a line-item veto, school prayer, a balanced budget, crime, drugs, welfare reform, and others. Ever the believer in the power of ideas, Gingrich was certain that after decades of New Deal liberalism, the issues
were moving their way and the voters would follow: “It’s like Kondratieff’s long wave theory of economics,” he said. “It’s a long wave theory of politics.”

In the beginning, the COS had three goals: “discredit the Democrats, develop a positive agenda for the Republican Party, and eventually dominate the party itself.” They joked that only two things stood in their way: the Democrats and the Republicans. The issues were fine, but the problem was that the COS had tremendous trouble attracting public notice. Stuck in the staid seniority system of the House, promoting their ideas through the committee system was not an option. Moreover, the members of the COS were too junior to get coverage on the national networks. They needed a method to “gain instant attention and circumvent the hierarchies that remained in the chambers, including the authority of party leaders.” They found one in C-SPAN.

 Television had come to the House of Representatives for the first time in 1979, the product of years of negotiations between cable companies and House leaders. Former Speaker Sam Rayburn of Texas had unwaveringly opposed opening the House to cameras and microphones because he thought it would “detract from the dignity of the chamber.” However, once Tip O’Neill had assumed the speakership, he agreed to let cameras into the House on the condition that the “camera only show close-ups of the person speaking and not reveal what was going on in the chamber itself.”

Charging that the Democrats were “ruthlessly partisan in changing the rules of the House, stacking committees, apportioning staff and questioning the Administration,” Gingrich concluded that the use of television would empower individuals like himself. Television soon became a potent weapon in the COS strategy. Bob Walker recognized this
opportunity first: “C-SPAN does work best for the minority party,” he reflected. “The majority controls the process—and it looks like it’s closing things down.”

Several years earlier, Republican leader Bob Michel (R-IL), noting Walker’s mastery of the House rules and his ability to think quickly on his feet, named him the “Minority Objector on the Consent Calendar,” the party’s traditional watchdog post. In this role, Walker would spend hours on the House floor, objecting to unanimous consent requests, offering amendments, and generally slowing the legislative process to a halt to protest what the COS saw as Democratic injustices. He often would make more speeches on the floor in one day than some members would make in a year.

Walker appeared so often on television that every time he would return to his office after giving a speech attacking the Democrats, he would find that the “phones in my office would light up.”

Walker was surprised at the effects his tactics were generating outside of Washington. At party conventions, the Republican faithful would often recognize him from his appearances on C-SPAN. “I was amazed at the outside impact of my tactics on the floor,” he recalled. “The C-SPAN coverage of Congress was reaching the country.”

Former Representative Jack Kemp (R-NY), the former Buffalo Bills quarterback, all-star and AFL MVP, liked to tell the story of how he was strolling on a beach in Puerto Rico when a woman came up to him and said, “Aren’t you Congressman Jack Kemp?” Ah, recognition: Kemp puffed with pride and admitted that he was. “Oh, Mr. Kemp,” the woman gushed, “do you know Bob Walker?”

By 1984, C-SPAN was delivering coverage of the House of Representatives to over 16 million households and had developed a devoted following of about a quarter-million viewers. As Gingrich put it, “I figured out if I could start making speeches on C-SPAN,
then I would reach a dramatically bigger audience than people who flew five hundred miles
to speak to a Kiwanis club.”

Walker and his COS colleagues took advantage of House rules to propagate their views to the television audience. Each morning, the members of the group would flock to the House chamber to give one-minute speeches attacking the Democrats. “We would hold COS meetings at a time in the morning that just preceded [the meeting of] the House and we would literally walk out of the COS meetings and walk as a group over to the House floor and sit down and do our one-minutes on the theme we had decided for that day,” Walker remembered. The number of one minute speeches increased from 110 in March 1977 to 344 by March 1981.55

In the evening, they would congregate along the back rail of the chamber to decide on topics for the evening’s “special order” speeches, speeches lasting up to one hour given after the close of House business, usually to an empty chamber, and as such, designed for home consumption. At the beginning of the 1984 session, Bob Walker tried to reserve four hours of special order time each day for COS members. The request, duly denied, took forty-five minutes and was an omen of things to come. “It’s going to be like Chinese water torture,” Gingrich said at the time.56

Day after day, Gingrich, Walker, Weber, and other COS members hammered away at the Democrats in the special order speeches, criticizing everything from pork barrel spending to their despotic control of the House. In the midst of these attacks, the COS speaker would often pause for a moment, seemingly to give their opponents a chance to respond. Of course, no one could; the House chamber was almost always empty. But it did not look as such to the television audience; since the cameras only showed the speaker, “viewers therefore
presumed that he or she was addressing a full house when actually the chamber was empty.”57

The Democrats deplored the tactics of the COS. Rep. David Bonior (D-WI) warned in 1983 that these speeches “will poison the national dialogue and cripple democratic debate.”58 Others were more vulgar. “They’re not going to achieve anything by all this,” said Rep. Bill Alexander (D-AR), the fourth-ranking Democrat. “They’re a bunch of ticks on a dog. The most they deserve is a swat of the tail.”59 Some Democrats took personal shots at members of the COS. “Bob Walker? The man’s an embarrassment,” said Rep. Mickey Leland (D-TX). “He’s got to be the most disliked guy in Congress.”60

Initially, the members of the COS were perceived as mavericks by their own leadership. In fact, they had come to be known as “Gingrich’s Guerillas.”61 The COS tactics worried senior Republicans in the House, who had been raised in the tradition of comity and camaraderie that transcended party differences.62 Thus, the relationship between the two groups was a contentious one. Republican Leader Bob Michel’s staff thought that the COS was impossible to work with. Moreover, they felt that Gingrich’s proposals “aimed to wrest power from the Republican leadership.”63 “The mainstream Republican establishment in the House viewed Gingrich as this ‘acid-throwing, bomb-throwing nut,’” recalled Rep. James Rogan (R-CA).64 Michel, who had served in Congress since 1957, was a congenial leader, the embodiment of the old-school tradition of the House. “I have given them some fatherly advice,” Michel was quoted as saying at the time of his rebellious youngsters. “Be gentlemanly and once you’ve made your point, get on with the business of governing.”65

On the other hand, members of the COS reacted against the timid attitude of the GOP leadership; they believed that the “go-along-to-get-along” attitude was responsible for the
Republicans’ inability to win a majority for decades. “If we behave the way we have always behaved, we will remain in the minority,” Gingrich wrote at the time. “We need large-scale, radical change.”

Republicans would only be successful in becoming a majority, he said, if they understood that “we are waging a peaceful civil war to take power from our opponents.” To them, the arguments about “governing” rang false; what they believed their leadership was doing was solely acquiescing to Democratic demands. Years later, Vin Weber described their attitude: “We felt our leadership did not have a winning strategy and needed to be prodded and cajoled to put one together to accomplish conservative objectives.”

Some more senior Republican members, however, could be counted on for support. Reps. Trent Lott of Mississippi, Jack Kemp of New York, and Dick Cheney of Wyoming offered the “Young Turks,” as the COS members were sometimes called, aid and comfort. Although none of them formally joined the COS, Lott, Kemp, and Cheney would from time to time “pop into COS meetings, take temperatures, offer words of encouragement, and then leave them on their own.”

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Although the Conservative Opportunity Society had been steadily gaining a following among devoted C-SPAN viewers thanks to their own tactics, it was the Democrats that finally put the COS on the map among the general public. On May 8, 1984, the COS was using their C-SPAN speeches to attack the Democrats for a weak record on fighting communism. Gingrich had taken the floor to criticize several Democrats by name of being “blind to communism” and accusing them of appeasement, saying they had a “pessimistic, defeatist, and skeptical view toward the American role in the world.” At different points in
his speech, he stopped and challenged the accused Democrats to respond to the charges, but “since the cameras only showed the person speaking, viewers were unaware that the Republicans were talking to an empty chamber.” Gingrich then read a report written by his aide Frank Gregorsky that had researched and compiled dovish statements made by several prominent Democrats over the years, including Eddie Boland (D-MA), a close friend of Tip O’Neill. Gingrich again challenged the accused Democrats to respond. It looked on television that the Democrats had no response when in fact they weren’t even present.

Initially, Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill (D-MA) thought that the members of the COS could be ignored. After all, they were just a bunch of backbench Republicans that their own leadership scarcely paid attention to. But as their attacks began to gain traction, this attitude changed. “Tip felt he could ignore Gingrich like a mosquito,” Rep. Geraldine Ferraro (D-NY) recalled, “but after a period of time people began to tell him that he better be careful because the mosquito was carrying malaria.”

When O’Neill heard of Gingrich’s comments, he was enraged, especially by Gingrich’s suggestion that Boland and the other cited Democrats did not have the courage to rise and defend themselves. As O’Neill described the events years later, “The next day, when Robert Walker of Pennsylvania tried something similar, I called Charlie Rose, the member in charge of television in the House, and told him I thought the cameras should pan the entire chamber. Charlie informed the camera crew, and when they showed the empty hall, Walker looked like a fool.”

Trent Lott, the Republican whip, who had been watching Walker speak in the Republican cloakroom, rushed to the House chamber to inform Walker of what had just occurred. Although O’Neill’s orders were well within his authority, Walker immediately
began attacking his actions: “It is my understanding that as I deliver this special order here this evening, the cameras are panning this chamber, demonstrating that there is no one here,” he said in shocked tones. “It is one more example of how this body is run: the kind of arrogance of power that the members are given that kind of change with absolutely no warning.”

The Republicans were furious, and not just the members of the COS. GOP Leader Bob Michel accused O’Neill of an “act of dictatorial retribution.” Jack Kemp charged that O’Neill had “altered procedure and tried to use the televising of the House to embarrass the Republicans.” When the debate was resumed the next Monday, O’Neill himself took to the floor of the House to defend his actions. “Nothing in the rules says that I have to notify you,” he declared. “Courtesy probably said that I should have. That is a courtesy your member [Gingrich] never gave to the twenty members he accused on the floor of the House.”

The next day, Gingrich was back on the floor to respond to O’Neill’s actions. As he spoke, O’Neill became angrier and angrier and, in a rare move for a speaker, went to the well to join the debate. Shaking his finger at Gingrich, he said, nearly shouting, “My personal opinion is this: You deliberately stood in that well before an empty House and challenged these people, and you challenged their Americanism! It’s un-American! It’s the lowest thing I’ve ever heard in my thirty-two years here.” Immediately, Trent Lott jumped to his feet and demanded the speaker’s words be “taken down” (stricken from the record) for violating a House rule against personal attacks on the House floor. Although the man sitting in the chair was Rep. Joe Moakley (D-MA), one of O’Neill’s close friends, the conclusion to Lott’s request was inescapable: “The Chair feels that that type of characterization should not be
used in debate.” This was the first time the Speaker of the House had been so reproached since 1797. Upon gathering his papers and making his exit a few moments later, Newt Gingrich received a standing ovation from the other Republicans in the chamber; he had carried the day.

The confrontation on the floor had huge implications for Gingrich and the Conservative Opportunity Society. First of all, “Camscam,” as the Republicans took to calling it, instantly made Gingrich a national figure, transforming him from a backbencher into a serious partisan contender. The exchange between him and the speaker was shown on all three network news shows that evening and was on the front page of The Washington Post the next day. “I am now a famous person,” Gingrich triumphantly declared. Later, O’Neill would agree while talking to Bob Walker: “Walker, you and Gingrich owe me,” he grumbled. “When I came out on the floor and attacked you, you were nothing but backbench-rabble rousers. I made you.”

Second, and most importantly, it brought the House Republican Party together. Whereas the COS was once viewed as an outside fringe, more and more members—conservatives and moderates among them—began to look at Gingrich and Co. as more than rabble-rousers. Indeed, when combined with the rule changes the Democrats had been implementing since the start of the decade, the COS’s claims that the Democrats were little more than a corrupt majority began to ring true. Hamilton Fish of New York, the ranking Republican on the Judiciary Committee known for his patrician reserve and moderate views, agreed: “Those of us who were not inclined to confrontation have now discovered that pressure, and tough pressure, is the way to get results.” Republican whip Trent Lott
concurred: “When you’re in the minority and the rules and the committees are stacked against you, you can roll over and whimper like a dog or you can bite somebody,” he said.  

“It was a huge breakthrough. It was just huge for us,” Bob Walker later recalled. “What made the moment was Trent Lott. When the Whip came to Newt’s defense, not only did we move from the back bench to the national spotlight, we were defended by our leadership and legitimized.” Indeed, when I visited Walker in his downtown Washington office in fall 2008, he proudly pointed to a photograph of the cameras panning the empty House chamber as he spoke. “That was one of the most seminal moments in the history of the modern House,” he told me. “It was the moment when we began to take back the House.”

Almost immediately, partisan rancor became the norm. Tip O’Neill took to calling Gingrich, Walker, and Weber “The Three Stooges,” and California Democrat Tony Coelho, the chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the political arm of the House Democrats, hired a private research firm to dig up dirt on Gingrich’s past and feed it to the leftist journal *Mother Jones*. 

The rancor was certainly not reserved for the Democratic side of the aisle. In a closed-door party conference, Vin Weber called O’Neill a “petty, second-class Boston politician [and] one of the cheapest, meanest politicians to occupy that office [speaker] in this century.” An edited tape was produced called “Tip’s Greatest Hits,” which compiled scenes of O’Neill “overruling, ignoring, insulting or denouncing assorted Republican members from his lofty perch at the front of the House chamber.” For a party long divided by moderates and conservatives, accomodationists and confrontationists, and party activists and district activists, the figure of Tip O’Neill became a rallying point, something that all
Republicans could identify with. As Washington Post political reporter T.R. Reid noted, “Whatever else O’Neill may achieve in the 98th Congress, he has pulled off one feat: he has molded the House Republicans, a farrago of conflicting philosophies and clashing ambitions, into a single unit held tightly together by mutual disdain for the speaker.”

The transformation of the House Republican Party into a cohesive unit and the legitimization of Newt Gingrich and the COS continued that fall. On election night 1984, incumbent Democratic congressman Frank McCloskey of Indiana seemed to have won the election by a seventy-two vote margin over his GOP opponent, Richard McIntyre. A few days later, officials discovered an accounting error and, after a recount, awarded McIntyre the seat with a thirty-four vote edge, a result that was then certified by Indiana’s Republican Secretary of State.

According to Article I, Section 5 of the Constitution, each house of Congress is the “judge of the elections, returns and qualifications of its own members.” On the opening day of the 99th Congress, Majority Leader Jim Wright (D-TX) introduced a resolution to declare the Indiana seat vacant and create a special taskforce of two Democrats and one Republican, chaired by Rep. Leon Panetta (D-CA), to investigate.

The committee dragged its feet for months, so during a pro forma session on March 4, Minority Leader Bob Michel surprised the Democrats by introducing a resolution to seat McIntyre. Since no Democrats had expected business to be conducted on the floor that day, most were absent, and Republicans flooded onto the floor. Rep. Bill Alexander (D-AR), the Democratic whip, then moved to table the resolution while he stalled the vote in order to allow Democrats enough time to get back to the Capitol. Speaker O’Neill criticized the GOP
leadership for bringing up the motion, to which Michel responded that he could not “wait for the majority in this House to find a way to seat someone other than one duly elected.”

The time for debate seemingly dragged on forever. In the words of Rep. Otis Pike (D-NY), who was then a journalist covering the House, “One of the glories of being in the majority is that you not only control the schedule, you control the clock…There were forty minutes of time left for debate. Eighteen minutes later, there were still thirty minutes left for debate.” The motion passed by one vote.

Several days later, on March 11, Rep. Bill Thomas of California, the lone Republican on the task force, walked out of its proceedings, saying the Democratic members had “set up the rules so their guy can win. I’ve tried to participate in the process, but by a two-to-one vote, I’m superfluous.” On April 18, by a two-to-one margin, the taskforce declared Democrat McCloskey the winner by four votes. The result was ratified by the House Administration Committee 12-0, with all the Republicans walking out of the committee room in protest.

Newt Gingrich had been paying close attention to the saga and saw another opportunity to make his point about the “corrupt” Democratic leadership. Meeting behind closed doors with the Republican leadership and entire Conference, he first suggested engaging in civil disobedience in the House. Although most Republicans did not want to go that far, they agreed to his plan B—a symbolic walkout of the entire Conference from the House floor. “It does not hurt to shoot a few warning shots across the bow,” Iowa Republican Tom Tauke said at the time. “On the other hand, the majority of Republicans know that shutting down the House is not a viable option.”

On May 1, the full House approved a resolution to seat McCloskey on a party line vote, with all Republicans and ten
Democrats voting no. When the result was announced, Gingrich led a walkout of the entire GOP Conference down the steps of the Capitol in symbolic protest, the first such walkout since 1890.

For many Republicans, the McIntyre-McCloskey saga had been “a radicalizing experience that made them more receptive to Gingrich’s message.” Moderate Republican Olympia Snowe of Maine said the election “symbolizes frustrations that have been building up for years.” “It goes much beyond one seat in Indiana,” asserted Trent Lott. “It goes to the fundamental problem about the way the House is run, to the Democrats’ arrogance of power.” To Bill Frenzel of Minnesota, this was symptomatic of the Democrats’ long stint in the majority: “Democrats have run the House for so long, they have lost the capacity to be embarrassed by any partisan act.”

For one thing, Gingrich’s strident cries of a corrupt House majority were seemingly proven true by the episode. Republicans were especially enraged that the Democrats would not hesitate to employ any and all tactics to accomplish what they saw as sleazy partisan ends. In this atmosphere, Republicans simply could not compete by playing by the old rules. GOP Policy Committee Chairman Dick Cheney fumed, “What choice does a self-respecting Republican have . . . except confrontation? If you play by the rules, the Democrats change the rules so they win. There’s absolutely nothing to be gained by cooperating with the Democrats at this point.” “The action validated Newt’s thesis,” Vin Weber later recalled. “The Democrats are corrupt, they are making us look like fools, and we are idiots to cooperate with them.”

The episode also portrayed Gingrich for the first time as more than just a bomb-thrower, but as a leader of the Republican Conference. “The Indiana incident legitimized
Newt’s claim to leadership,” Republican strategist Rich Galen said. “It gave him moral standing that he otherwise never would have had. It may have taken him another decade to become leader.”\textsuperscript{102} Gingrich was truly able to tap a deep nerve that ran through the House GOP with his decisive, albeit symbolic, action to demonstrate that what the Democrats were doing was simply unacceptable.

Interestingly, Newt’s leadership was contrasted by Michel’s. Although Michel helped lead the walk-out of the House Republicans, he almost immediately returned to the House floor to shake McCloskey’s hand, receiving a standing ovation from the Democrats on the floor. While Gingrich viewed this as appeasement, Michel looked at it as governing. To the Leader, confrontation was good politics but not good policy; after all, members had been elected to the House to pass legislation, and to do that, they had to work with the Democrats. Some saw the two competing styles as complementary. “It’s like two sides of a coin,” said Rep. Lynn M. Martin (R-Ill.). “One complements the other. The Bob Michel style allows time for congeniality and comity to exist. Without that, you can’t govern. The Gingrich style believes confrontation can also produce results. He believes in action, in pushing, in moving forward. Without that, you could always be in the minority.”\textsuperscript{103}

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On the opening day of the 100\textsuperscript{th} Congress, Jim Wright of Texas was elected speaker, replacing the retired Tip O’Neill. Wright had served in Congress since 1954 and had been House Majority Leader, the number two leadership post for the Democrats, since 1976, after he won election to the position by one vote. Although initially Wright had striven to work from the center of the political spectrum, his tenuous hold on the Majority Leader position
caused him to turn sharply left and sharply partisan. As one Democrat explained it, “He couldn’t be elected speaker. It’s that simple.”104

Republicans did not have high expectations for the new speaker, but rather feared that his election would usher in an era of increased partisanship, even from the previous highs set during the tenure of O’Neill. Their fears came true on October 29, 1987, a date Republicans would later call “Black Thursday.” In the midst of a debate about a budget reconciliation bill, Wright had directed the Rules Committee to impose a self-executing rule on the bill, which attached ten separate Democratic amendments to the bill without separate votes. Included in these ten was a 6 billion dollar welfare reform package. Republicans, and many Democrats, opposed this action, believing the amendments should be voted on separately. Subsequently, a coalition of Republicans and the dissatisfied Democrats defeated the rule.

Wright, however, was not to be outdone. According to House rules, a bill must receive two-thirds support to be returned to the floor on the same day, a threshold Wright could not meet given the solid Republican opposition to the bill. To get around this rule, Wright ordered the adjournment of the House and then immediately reconvened it for a new “legislative day,” a maneuver that only required a one-half majority. It was obvious that this act was a raw power play, but one that Republicans were unable to stop. Conservative William Dannemeyer (R-CA) took to the floor and said, “Genesis tells us that the Lord created the world in seven days. We are now witnessing the creation of an eighth day. I just ask the gentleman, does he have a name for this new creation?” Majority Leader Tom Foley replied, “Yes, it is called the Guaranteed Deficit Reduction Act.”105

Fifteen minutes later, when time expired on voting for the reconciliation bill, the vote stood at 205-206. Republicans were ecstatic and shouted at Wright to declare the bill
defeated. The speaker continued to stall, sitting quietly in his chair and refusing to close the vote. Suddenly, a voice rang out “Hold the vote!” and a Wright aide brought Texas Democrat Jim Chapman back to the well to switch his vote.106 With the total standing at 206-205, Wright rapped the gavel and pronounced the bill passed.

Republicans were furious. “Bush League! Boooo! Bush League!” they yelled. Trent Lott slammed his fist on a lectern, shattering it. Dick Cheney paced the floor, saying “This is just totally unacceptable. This is absolute bullshit. It’s absolute bullshit.” Dan Lundgren, a member of the COS, stormed the speaker’s dais and was blocked by John Bryant (D-TX); the two of them were on the verge of blows. Although some of the other Democratic leaders had expressed concerns over Wright’s tactics, as then-Majority Leader Tom Foley (D-WA) reported, “It was pretty much the speaker’s decision…The bill was going to pass, ‘it was going to goddamn pass.’ He was in that sort of mood.”107

In the aftermath of the reconciliation bill, partisan tensions in Washington exploded. The enormous animosity felt between Wright and the GOP poisoned the work of Congress. “I’m so mad at Jim Wright and Tom Foley I don’t want to talk to them, never mind negotiate with them in good faith. They ought to be ashamed of themselves.” Lott said.108 Cheney claimed, “The degree of partisanship, the strength of feeling, is more than it has been…We had our problems with Tip O’Neill, too, but with Wright it is somehow more bitter.”109

Speaking with a National Journal reporter, Cheney was even more explicit: Wright was “a heavy-handed son of a bitch…and he will do anything he can to win at any price, including ignoring the rules, bending rules, writing rules, denying the House the opportunity to work its will. It brings disrespect to the House itself. There’s no sense of comity left. Why should you, if you are a Republican, and given the way Republicans are treated, think
of a Democrat as a colleague? They aren’t colleagues.” Even Willis Gradison of Ohio, the lone Republican to offer the Democrats his help on the budget several months prior, said a week after the reconciliation vote, “It takes a lot to politicize me. Wright’s done it. I’m partisan as hell now.”

The highly charged atmosphere once again led Republicans to the strategies and tactics of Newt Gingrich and the Conservative Opportunity Society. Without intending to do so, of course, Wright “really became a catalyst for bringing the whole Republican Party over to our [COS’s] side,” reported Bob Walker. “It galvanized the GOP around activist tactics.” Gingrich took up the Republican cause against Wright with a vengeance. Wright, he asserted, was “the most corrupt speaker in the 20th century,” a man “so consumed by his own power that he’s like Mussolini.”

Employing a tactic he had used against other Democrats in the past, Gingrich instructed his staff to begin looking into possible ethics violations against Wright. His goal was to make Wright a metaphor for a corrupt Democratic Party. He sent a staff member to Texas to investigate Wright’s past and then used Wright’s relationship with savings and loan executives to raise questions about his personal integrity. In September 1987, The Washington Post gave Gingrich more ammunition by published a front-page story disclosing that Wright had a sweetheart deal on a privately published book. According to the Post, Wright received 55 percent royalties, which was five times more than an author’s standard payment. After compiling a thick folder of clippings raising questions about Wright’s business dealings, Gingrich publicly announced on December 15 that he intended to formally file an ethics complaint against Wright.
Gingrich’s friends initially thought he was making a huge mistake. After having shown himself to be a leader of the House GOP during the fight over the Indiana congressional seat, they believed that Gingrich would jeopardize his new status by pursuing the ethics complaint against Wright. For one thing, they did not think it was possible to dislodge a sitting speaker. In fact, Gingrich was opening himself up for a Democratic counterattack into his own personal past, a past that was not exactly as clean as a whistle. Gingrich dismissed these concerns, telling Vin Weber, “I’m not a perfect person. I’ve got a lot in my background that isn’t pleasant. But there’s nothing like the genuine corruption of Jim Wright.”116 “Newt finally said, I’m going to do it. I’m going to see these charges get filed and if no one is behind me then so be it,” Bob Walker remembered.117

The outrage that followed Wright’s maneuver during the reconciliation bill provided Gingrich the opportunity to make his case to the entire Republican Conference. However, the leadership was still skeptical, and in March 1988, Bob Michel asked two Republicans with prosecutorial experience, Bob Livingston of Louisiana and James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin, to examine Gingrich’s evidence to see if it was enough to go to a grand jury. They concluded that it was not. Undaunted, Gingrich went back to the press. Gingrich tirelessly made speeches, held press conferences, and spoke with reporters about Wright. His strategy was simple. “We worked on the assumption that if enough newspapers said there should be an investigation, Common Cause118 would have to say it. Then members would have to say it. It would happen.”119 On May 18, Common Cause called for an investigation and on May 26, Gingrich filed a formal complaint, which was accompanied by a letter of support signed by seventy-one House Republicans.120 On July 26, the House Ethics Committee launched their investigation.
By the spring of 1989, the House seemed to be mired in scandal. On April 17, the Ethics Committee issued a report charging Wright with sixty-nine separate violations of House rules. On March 26, Democratic Whip Tony Coelho of California resigned rather than face an investigation into questionable financial dealings in junk bonds. Wright faced intense pressure in the press, as dozens of editorials were written calling for his resignation. Most importantly, his support among members of his own party was melting away. Democrats “were so concerned about public opinion,” said Rep. John Murtha (D-PA), “the fact that it looked like Jim had done something wrong” was enough to make them distance themselves from him. Finally, on May 31, after an hour-long, emotional speech on the House floor, Wright resigned as speaker and a month later resigned his seat in Congress.

Democrats lamented the growing partisan atmosphere in Washington, and blamed Gingrich for bringing it about. “There’s an evil wind blowing in the halls of Congress today that’s reminiscent of the Spanish Inquisition. We’ve replaced comity and compassion with hatred and malice,” said Rep. Jack Brooks (D-TX) after Wright’s resignation. Some Democrats insisted this was opportunism. Rep. Vic Fazio recalled, “I had seen him use the ethics issue from the day he arrived, not because he cared about ethics but because of his ongoing effort to expose the Democratic Congress as corrupt and out of touch.”

But in Republican eyes, Wright was so partisan and ruthless that his fall, by whatever means, was beneficial. Indeed, at the next meeting of the Republican Conference after Wright’s resignation, Gingrich was given a standing ovation.

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Partisan or not, by this time Republicans had recognized a certain toughness in Gingrich, a steeliness of will that elevated him above the others in the COS. His dogged and
often singular pursuit of Wright, though the speaker had not yet resigned, had shown his colleagues that he was more than just a bomb-thrower, but someone who had the ideas, the audacity, and the drive to finally carry them out of their long stay in the minority.

On March 10, 1989, President Bush nominated Dick Cheney, who had become Republican whip when Trent Lott had been elected to the Senate in 1988, to be Secretary of Defense. The surprise appointment had come on the heels of the Senate’s rejection of Bush’s first nominee, former Senator John Tower of Texas. As soon as he heard the news, Gingrich decided to run for whip. “I couldn’t allow another member of the Michel wing…to get into the chain of succession,” Gingrich explained. “Michel is a very fine man. A man I can respect a great deal. But he had adopted a model of politics in which it was virtually inevitable we’d be a minority.”

Initially, the whip’s race seemed wide open; The Washington Post reported that nine members were considering entering the race. However, when Gingrich announced he was running, the contest became, in the words of Oklahoma Republican Mickey Edwards, “Gingrich vs. anti-Gingrich.” The Michel wing of the party coalesced around Edward Madigan of Illinois, the chief deputy whip and stylistically a carbon copy of Bob Michel. In fact, Michel made it clear that he would support Madigan, but at the behest of Bob Walker and a group of two dozen conservatives, Michel agreed that he would not play an active role in corralling votes for Madigan.

Cheney’s nomination was announced on a Friday, and Gingrich and his COS allies immediately got on the phone to round up support for Gingrich’s candidacy for whip. “We had calls going all over the nation. I personally made fifty or sixty calls that weekend. Newt called nearly everybody in the conference,” Bob Walker remembered. Two of the first calls
Gingrich made that weekend were to Steve Gunderson of Wisconsin and Nancy Johnson of Connecticut. Gunderson and Johnson were influential members of the 92 Group, a caucus of the moderate Republicans in the House.

The 92 Group had been formed around the same time as the Conservative Opportunity Society, but the two groups were not rivals. In fact, Gingrich, recognizing that creating factions within an already weak House GOP would be detrimental to his goal of creating a majority, had established friendly relations between the COS and 92 Group in the mid-1980s. Often, members of each group would meet together on Wednesday mornings to talk policy and strategy. Although they did not agree on everything, the leadership of both organizations realized they shared a lot of common ground. Gingrich understood how to deal with their differences “without eroding what united us,” Johnson later recalled.127

Over years of working with him, Gunderson and Johnson came to admire and respect Newt Gingrich, both for his intellectual curiosity as well as his unwavering drive. When Gingrich called them to ask for their support for the whip race, they immediately agreed, and went to work courting other GOP moderates. Gunderson instructed his staff to call every other Republican moderate. “I said don’t commit to anyone else until we have a chance to tell you why we think this is important to the future of the party.” Although some were shocked that they would be supporting Gingrich, Johnson told them that he had “the vision to build a majority party and the strength and charisma to do it.”128

When the votes were tallied, Gingrich had won a stunning victory by a razor-thin margin of 87-85. His success was testament to the incredible frustrations that had been building up within the Republican Party for years. The election broke down generational lines, with most of the younger members, including many moderates, willing to gamble on
Gingrich while rejecting the party’s traditional attitude of accommodating the majority. As William Safire wrote in *a New York Times* editorial before the votes were cast, “This is not a moderate vs. conservative split. The struggle is about the basic approach to how the Republicans do business in the House: dickering for crumbs from the table of Speaker Wright or sharing fairly in power with Speaker-to-be Foley.” Representative Lynn Martin of Illinois said: “I think people felt we accommodated ourselves for a number of years and we’ve ended up with fewer seats. Let’s try something else.” Even Bob Michel realized that the GOP Conference wanted change. Michel said Gingrich “won by a clean, clear fight in the conference. And so what that says to me is they want us to be more activated and more visible and more aggressive and we can’t be content with business as usual.”

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The story of the House Republican Party in the 1980s is one of dramatic transformation. When the decade began, House Republicans were content in their minority role, accepting of the fact that they were a permanent minority. All but a very small few had never served under a Republican speaker, and none believed that they would ever see such a thing again. Time had bred complacency, and no Republican with any piece of power, no matter how small, was willing to risk it for their party.

By the end of the decade, an active and confrontational House GOP had been forged, and the highly partisan Newt Gingrich had been elected GOP whip. The whip election itself offered powerful evidence of the degree to which the House Republicans had been transformed. “I came here [in 1978] and the party would never elect Newt Gingrich to be whip, and for ten years I changed the party,” Gingrich said. “I didn’t run for leadership, I
just changed the party. In 1989 I went from being backbencher to the second-ranking Republican.”  

Gingrich, of course, overstates his case. First of all, the partisan tactics employed by the Democrats in restricting debate, stacking committees, reporting closed rules provided the context in which Republicans could first begin to listen to the arguments of Gingrich. Second, the membership of the House was changing. Older Republicans, generally more accommodationist in their thinking, retired throughout the decade, and they were replaced by a new crop of younger Republicans who were more willing to take risks given their low position on the seniority lists and their miniscule amount of power. By 1989, the factions that favored Gingrich had grown while those that opposed him shrunk.

Nevertheless, one cannot discount the actions of Gingrich and the members of the Conservative Opportunity Society in reshaping the mindset and attitudes of their House Republican colleagues. No one man can change an institution the size of the House, Richard Nixon told Gingrich in the fall of 1982, but a group of committed activists, faithful to ideas and willing to take risks, can accomplish a revolution. The COS displayed remarkable fidelity to their cause and were able to master a powerful new medium—television—in order to advance it. They called for a change of attitude before anyone else did, and when partisanship became the norm in the House chamber, they were uniquely suited to lead.

Like people, institutions are shaped by the major events in their lives. The special order debates on the floor, Camscam and the subsequent battle on the floor between Gingrich and O’Neill, the McCloskey-McIntyre election, “Black Thursday,” and the ethics probe of Jim Wright each seared the memories of Democrats and Republicans, coloring their vision of subsequent events. These fights became the oral history of the House, a sort of creation myth.
that each party taught to their newcomers. These stories changed patterns of thought and action.

Gingrich benefitted greatly from the emerging GOP story that portrayed the Democrats as arrogant politicians that would yield to nothing but fierce partisan pressure. Now with a leadership position as House whip, and as the heir apparent to GOP Leader Bob Michel, who was widely expected to retire within a few years, Gingrich was uniquely positioned to lead the Republican Party into the tumultuous political waters of the 1990s.
CHAPTER 2: DEVELOPING AN IDENTITY

The idyllic farms and rolling hills of Kentucky’s second congressional district were a peculiar place to find a revolution. The district, spreading south and west of Louisville along the Ohio River, was emblematic of small-town America, a place where family roots ran deep and a connection with the past was much more pronounced than one would find in the cities. Both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis had been born within the boundaries of the Second District, and during the Civil War its counties had been split on secession. However, at the end of the war, the district, like much of the Old South, voted solidly Democratic.

By 1994, William Huston Natcher had represented the second district in the United States House of Representatives for forty-one years. A member of the very old school, he served as the chairman of the Appropriations Committee, one of the most powerful positions in Congress, and was so hard-working and conscientious that he had never missed a single roll call vote during his entire career, a streak of 18,401 consecutive votes. So faithful to his streak, Natcher had once hired a cab to drive him from Louisville to Washington when weather grounded his plane. Near death in March 1994, Natcher was even rolled onto the House floor on a gurney hooked up to an IV and oxygen to keep his streak alive.

Natcher was a living legend, an institution within the institution of the House. He was in his office by 7:00 a.m. every morning, opened his own mail, and, in an age when the number of congressional staffers was skyrocketing, only employed “five ladies,” as he described them, who answered the telephones, greeted visitors and took dictation. Although as Appropriations Chair he was one of the most powerful men in the country and
could have easily raised a war-chest of campaign cash, he refused to take campaign donations, preferring instead to place a few advertisements in the local papers and drive his own car around the district, going from farm to farm, house to house, door to door. In 1990, he spent $6,768 of his own money to win 66 percent of the vote against his Republican challenger who spent $144,315.\textsuperscript{134}

When Natcher died of heart failure in March 1994, Democrats did not worry about losing the seat. Although in recent presidential elections, the district had voted for the Republican candidate, including a dominating 20 percentage point margin in 1988 for George Bush, the Second District had been represented in the House by Democrats continuously since 1865, and 68 percent of the district’s voters were registered Democrats. Following Natcher’s death, a special election to fill his seat was called for May 24.

Initially, the Kentucky contest looked like a terrible mismatch. The Democratic candidate, Joe Prather, was well known after having served as state party chairman and as Democratic leader in the State Senate for a decade. His Republican opponent was Ron Lewis, a Baptist minister and owner of a small Christian bookstore with no political experience. Prather was so confident that he would win the seat that the week before the special election, he traveled to Washington to go apartment hunting.

The Republicans, however, had different ideas. On March 10, a special election was held in Oklahoma to fill the seat of retiring Democrat Glenn English, and Republican Frank Lucas had won a surprisingly easy race against his Democratic opponent, Dan Webber, who worked for popular Oklahoma Senator David Boren. The relatively easy GOP victory in a traditionally Democratic district had important implications. As Newt Gingrich later
explained, “The unexpected, easy victory in Oklahoma…inspired us to put all of our efforts into the [Kentucky] campaign.”

Buoyed by the prospect of another stunning victory, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) committed maximum resources over the last two weeks of the Kentucky race. In early May, the committee commissioned a poll that showed Prather with a fifteen point lead, which was far from insurmountable considering that Lewis had almost no name recognition. Even better news was President Clinton’s abysmal standing in the district. As a result of his failure to keep his campaign promises, his languishing healthcare bill, and his inability to work effectively with congressional Democrats, only 30 percent thought he deserved reelection in 1996 and 56 percent—including almost half of the Democrats surveyed—thought that voting Republican would be a good way of sending the president a message. The strategy was clear to NRCC Chairman Rep. Bill Paxon of New York: “We’re going after Clinton,” he told his staff.

The attack, however, could not be an overt, frontal assault, but rather a stealth campaign that would catch the complacent Democrats napping. The NRCC prevailed on Lewis and his campaign to hold their attacks and their money for the last week of the campaign. In the meantime, the national party organization was hard at work producing an advertisement that would evaporate Prather’s lead in the polls and epitomize the Republican strategy for the fall campaign: the Morph Ad.

Computer technology had grown sophisticated enough in the mid-1990s that programmers were able to transform faces on the screen. This was the basis of the Morph Ad. “If you like Bill Clinton, you’ll love Joe Prather,” the unseen announcer’s voice boomed as Prather’s face morphed into Bill Clinton’s and then back again on the screen, “Send a
message to Bill Clinton. Send Ron Lewis to Congress.” On Friday, May 13, the Lewis campaign bought saturation-level coverage of the Morph Ad, which prompted an immediate shift in the polls. Prather, who was on his apartment-hunting trip to Washington when the ad came out, rushed back to the district but never regained his footing. In the last week of the campaign, a Republican barrage of mail, television, and endorsement visits inundated the district. Lewis toured the district from the air with Bob Dole; it was the first time Lewis’s wife had been on an airplane.

On Election Day, May 24, Lewis won a resounding victory, 55 percent to 45 percent. The significance of his victory was not lost on the national party establishment. In the NRCC offices in Washington, an impromptu party had broken out, with members backslapping and celebrating. “You could almost feel the dam burst,” Paxon recalled. A tidal wave of excitement was clearly afoot, and the Republicans knew they could take advantage of the anti-Clinton feelings to gain seats in the House of Representatives that fall. Clinton—more specifically, opposition to Clinton—was the glue that would connect this new coalition of voters. Speaking of the Morph Ad the day after the special election, Newt Gingrich told reporters, “I wouldn’t be surprised to see that ad in two hundred districts this fall.”

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The GOP victory in Kentucky in 1994 instantly and dramatically changed the complexion of the 1994 race, but such a victory was unimaginable just two years prior. In the aftermath of the 1992 elections, the Republican Party was in the doldrums. The party had lost the White House after twelve consecutive years of Republican governance, and the
Democrats continued to hold substantial majorities in both houses of Congress. Worse, the party was disillusioned and disappointed.

Central to this lack of identity among Republicans was the performance of George H.W. Bush as president. By nearly all measures, the Bush years had been a failure for the Republican Party. “When Ronald Reagan left for California on January 20, 1989, George Bush was left with more assets than any president in history,” Rep. Dick Armey (R-TX) wrote. “Seeing liberalism in its death throes, voters turned to George Bush and said, ‘Finish it off!’ Instead, they got a reversal of the Reagan Revolution.”138

Armey’s derisive comments refer to the 1990 budget battle, arguably the defining political contest of Bush’s presidency and the moment when House Republicans declared their independence from White House leadership. In the midst of the 1988 campaign, Bush famously pronounced, “Read my lips—no new taxes!” However by the spring of 1990, the forecasted deficit for fiscal year 1991 was $20 billion more than the $64 billion level that the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act allowed. Bush, partly looking toward his own reelection, opened up budget negotiations in May by declaring that “everything was on the table,” including the possibility of increased taxes, in the effort to close the budget gap.

After two months of false-starts, Bush invited congressional leaders from both parties to the White House for breakfast on June 26 as a way to jump-start the budget process. In a statement to the press later that day, Bush reaffirmed his earlier willingness to consider what he termed “tax revenue increases.” No one was fooled by the semantics. The Washington Post ran the headline, “Bush Abandons Campaign Pledge, Calls for New Taxes.”139

As soon as they heard the news, House Republicans were furious. White House Chief of Staff John Sununu called Gingrich to reassure him that the president was still
committed to not raising taxes, only to increasing revenue. Privately, Gingrich was livid and slammed the phone down on Sununu. By mid-afternoon, Rep. Bob Walker (R-PA) had rounded up ninety signatures on a letter from House Republicans to Bush: “We were stunned by your announcement that you would be willing to accept tax revenue increases as a part of a budget summit package. A tax increase is unacceptable.”\footnote{140} Walker’s letter was quickly followed by a similar one signed by two dozen Republican senators.

Although Gingrich, as the Republican whip, was nominally part of the negotiations, he was torn between his loyalty to the Republican Conference that elected him and his desire to want to help a president of his own party. Initially, he seemed willing to compromise, hinting that he and other House Republicans would be able to support increased taxes as long as they weren’t in the income tax and they were combined with a reduction in the capital gains tax. However, Gingrich’s resistance to any new taxes stiffened as he learned more about the president’s proposal. “There got to be a point during the budget summit that I was beginning to listen carefully to liberal Democratic arguments and tried to figure out how I could agree with them,” Gingrich said. “When I got home I realized, in fact, that that was not why I got hired,” he said. “I suddenly realized how real the ‘Stockholm Syndrome’ is—when you are captured by a terrorist and start identifying with the kidnappers.”\footnote{141}

Throughout the summer, the warning signals from the House Republicans grew louder and more frequent. In July, Rep. Dick Armey proposed a resolution in the Republican Conference that said GOP members would oppose any deal that included a tax increase. The Conference adopted it by a two-to-one margin on July 18. “We admire the president, and we support the president, but we don’t work for the president,” said Representative Mickey Edwards, an Oklahoma Republican.\footnote{142} In the wake of this resolution, Armey was excluded
from budget negotiations, despite the fact he was the ranking member of the Joint Economic Committee. On August 22, Gingrich gave a speech to the Heritage Foundation in which he lambasted the proposed tax increases. Over Labor Day weekend, Gingrich told White House congressional liaison Nick Calio that he owed his loyalty to the House Republican Conference and his own principles, not to the White House.

Bush and his principle economic advisors, Office of Management and Budget Director Richard Darman and Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady, ignored these warnings, instead believing that Gingrich and the rest of the House Republicans would have to support the package in the end. “The pressure on Newt at that point was enormous,” Walker said. “What they were using on him was, you’re now a member of the leadership, you signed up to be a member of the leadership, your president needs you right now.”

Gingrich was sending mixed signals. He continued to attend the summit negotiations, but spoke little, instead preferring to read novels and write notes to colleagues. In September, he sent a memo to Sununu and Darman that hinted that he could support the final package: “With a good agreement and full partnership in the decision process, the Republican leadership and membership will work hard,” he wrote.

With 10 days to go before the negotiators’ self-imposed deadline of October 1, most of the negotiators, including Gingrich, were dismissed and the fate of the budget package was put in the hands of the so-called Big Eight: Sununu, Darman, and Brady from the administration and Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole (R-KS), House Minority Leader Bob Michel (R-IL), House Speaker Tom Foley (D-WA), House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-MO), and Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-ME). As the negotiators met
behind closed doors at Andrews Air Force Base, nervous House Republicans sported “Junk the Summit” buttons.

Finally, on September 29, a deal was reached and a Rose Garden ceremony was planned for the next day. Sununu called Gingrich to brief him on the outline of the deal, which included $133 billion in new taxes over five years, but did not contain the capital gains tax cuts that Gingrich and other House Republicans had wanted. Gingrich said that House Republicans would not support it, and repeated the same message to the president just before the Rose Garden announcement the next day: “I can’t support this,” he said. “I don’t think it will pass…I think you may destroy your presidency and I think it’d be an enormous mistake.”

Immediately, Gingrich left the White House and traveled back to the Capitol to organize the opposition to the budget bill. He found an angry GOP Conference. “It looks like a road map to recession,” said Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA). “I think it’s a cave-in to the liberal Democrats. This is totally irresponsible, and the system has broken down.”

“To me, this is the fiscal equivalent of Yalta,” remarked Rep. Chuck Douglas (R-NH).

Initially, their opposition strategy was undecided, but as Rep. Dan Burton (R-CA) made clear, “This is guerrilla war, and you may rest assured that whatever it takes to scuttle this terrible budget package, we will do it.”

Gingrich quickly came out publicly against the package, and he was joined by four other members of the GOP House Leadership: Reps. Vin Weber (R-MN), Bill McCollum (R-FL), Duncan Hunter (R-CA) and Robert Walker (R-PA). Both Dole and Michel urged Republicans to support the president, and the White House sent Sununu, Brady, Darman, and Vice President Dan Quayle to lobby for the package. On October 2, the president spoke to
the American people from the Oval Office, telling them that “this deficit agreement is tough and so are the times…This is the first time in my presidency that I’ve made an appeal like this to you, the American people. With your help, we can at last put this budget crisis behind us and face the challenges that lie ahead.”

On October 4, debate ensued in the House and on the next morning, the package was defeated by a vote of 179-254, with 105 House Republicans, led by Gingrich, voting against the measure and only 71 supporting it. Combined with a majority of the Democrats who were upset at the bill’s spending cuts, the budget package went down. It was an embarrassing defeat for the White House, especially considering President Bush’s strident appeal for support in his televised address. Although the budget negotiators went back to work and agreed on a new package by the end of the month, the second bill was even worse than the first one in the eyes of House conservatives, and it passed with the help of Democrats, not Republicans.

The budget episode demonstrated how volatile the House GOP had become, and how willing they were to buck their party’s leaders in favor of their ideologies. Ironically, the House Republicans’ insistence to not bend on ideological principles caused the White House to look for votes on the Democratic side of the aisle, guaranteeing that the new bill would be even more unacceptable to the House GOP. Rather than compromise, their all-or-nothing approach was detrimental to their efforts to align policy with principle, although it ended up being beneficial politically, one of the fundamental paradoxes of politics.

For many Republicans, the Bush years were characterized by the words of Rep. Tom DeLay, who said, “I spent the entire four years fighting Republicans, not Democrats.” The budget battle was the moment when the House Republicans declared their status as an
autonomous political force, and they began to think of themselves and their fate, as independent of the White House.

This change of perspective was extremely significant as the 1990s moved forward. Since the Republicans had last been the majority in the House in 1954, of the thirty-eight years between then and 1992 when Bill Clinton was elected president, the House GOP had served for twenty-six of them under Republican presidents, including the last twelve under Reagan and Bush. By the 1990s, they had grown accustomed to taking their lead from the White House, which in many cases meant they had no opportunity to pursue their own ideas and proposals. However, after the break with Bush, the House GOP no longer felt tied to the White House, and thus was able to become an independent political force even while a Republican still controlled the White House. By not merely existing to further the president’s agenda, the House Republicans were free to formulate their own, and thus were able to acclimate themselves to acting independent of outside guidance. The two years that the House Republicans were able to do this under a Republican president were instrumental in allowing them to become a formidable opposition to President Clinton when he took office in 1993. In contrast, the Democrats went from being an opposition party to being the governing party (in the sense that they controlled the White House), and did not acclimate to their new situation as seamlessly as the Republicans.

Gingrich himself, as a member of the leadership, came under heavy criticism for his opposition to the president. “You pay a penalty for leadership,” snapped Bob Dole, the Senate Republican leader. “If you don’t want to pay the penalty, maybe you ought to find some other line of work.” Richard Darman, the OMB director, later complained that Gingrich had intimated that he would support the package, only to renege later on: “He
never led people to believe he might bolt.” To Darman, Gingrich’s actions were like “a stab in the back.” 153

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To Gingrich, however, it was clear that his loyalties lied with the House Republican Conference, a group that he had done much to transform since his election to Congress in 1978. Cleverly reasoning that “if you just kept building momentum and you would capture 70 to 80 percent of the incoming freshmen every two years, at some point you have transformed the whole structure,” Gingrich went to work from his position at the NRCC to involve himself with the campaigns and elections side of House Republican politics. 154

In 1986, he received an unexpected boon when he was asked to take over GOPAC, a political action committee founded in 1979 by former Delaware Governor Pete DuPont. DuPont had established GOPAC to fundraise and recruit Republican candidates for state and local offices. His goal was to create a “farm team” of sorts—an army of local officials that would be able to challenge Democrats for seats in Congress and governorships in the future. As DuPont put it, “You can’t work from the top down with the right guy at the top of the ticket, you’ve got to have that army…The GOP is not the majority party today and it won’t be until we get down to the governors, mayors and county commissioners.” 155

Fearing that GOPAC would become entangled in his candidacy for the 1988 Republican presidential nomination, DuPont searched for an energetic young conservative to replace him. “We were looking for someone who wanted to build the party at the grass roots,” DuPont said. “Newt seemed head and shoulders above everybody.” Over the next few years, Gingrich transformed GOPAC from a traditional political action committee that solely doled out campaign dollars to a dynamic training organization that was designed to
give candidates the wherewithal to run and win on their own.\textsuperscript{156} To that end, Gingrich traveled around the country meeting candidates and potential donors, gradually building a base for himself and for his cause.

The most important mechanism Gingrich developed at GOPAC was a series of tapes—audio and video—that he sent to thousands of local candidates around the country. They would arrive unsolicited, containing hours upon hours of “tactics and strategies and ideas and issues, lectures from Gingrich or his political advisors, [and] interviews with other successful Republicans.” In the words of two reporters, “It was like subscribing to a motivational course, with Gingrich a cross between Norman Vincent Peale and a Marine drill sergeant.”\textsuperscript{157}

“I started getting tapes in 1986 or 1987,” said Rep. John Boehner (R-OH), who was elected to the House in 1990. Boehner popped the tape into his car’s cassette player. “I thought, this is great...If it weren’t for the tapes, I probably wouldn’t have run for Congress. I’m not sure I would have been comfortable enough understanding the breadth of a lot of issues and where we should go.”\textsuperscript{158} Roger Wicker, elected to the House in 1994 and now a U.S. Senator from Mississippi, was another GOPAC devotee: “A great deal of the political philosophy I brought to Washington was shaped by Newt Gingrich.”\textsuperscript{159}

GOPAC also provided material on how to talk “Gingrich.” In 1990, the committee sent over 6,000 state and local candidates a memo entitled “Language, a Key Mechanism of Control,” which listed 133 words that they should use to describe themselves and their opponents. Positive words included opportunity, challenge, courage, pristine, principle(d), care, caring, common sense, peace, and pioneer. Negatives ones included decay, sick, unionized bureaucracy, greed, corruption, radical, permissive, and bizarre.\textsuperscript{160} When

\begin{quote}
Penn Humanities Forum Mellon Undergraduate Research Fellowship, Final Paper April 2009
Noah Weiss, College ’09
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Democrats heard of this mailing, they were not amused. Gingrich was called “a modern day McCarthy” by his opponent in the 1990 election; other Democrats were more subtle in their criticism: “While the Democrats are dealing with issues, Republicans are playing Scrabble,” quipped Democratic National Committee spokeswoman Ginny Terzano.161

Through GOPAC, Gingrich was successful in his goal to recruit and train a generation of candidates who would talk and think like him. By the early 1990s, Gingrich and GOPAC were working hand-in-hand with Spencer Abraham—then the executive director of the NRCC—to recruit candidates for Congress, many of whom won. Combined with the large number of retirements of older members in the early 1990s, by 1992, the makeup of the Republican Conference was decidedly younger, more conservative, and more activist. Following Bush’s loss of the White House, this energized Republican Conference would be free to pursue its own agenda.

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President Bush stumbled through 1992, running an uninspired general election campaign that was notable only for its constantly shifting message and inability to define itself. As early as April, Gingrich wrote the president to urge him to find his voice: “I am close to despair about the self-destructive patterns and habits of this administration…We are inconsistent, uncertain, and unreliable.”162 To many observers, it was incredible that by the August Republican National Convention, Bush was down twenty points to a young, southern governor who was dogged by character issues, especially considering that Bush had enjoyed record-high approval ratings just one year prior for his handling of the Gulf War.

The Republican Party had been badly fractured since the 1990 budget battle. To many conservatives, Bush’s decision to raise taxes to close the deficit forced the party to
squander an opportunity to reinforce its status among the American electorate that the GOP was the anti-tax party. The bitter primary battle that Bush faced from conservative Pat Buchanan and then Buchanan’s inflammatory speech at the Republican National Convention declaring that the United States was in the middle of a culture war were symptoms of a party that had lost its unity and purpose. Registered Republicans bolted the party by the thousands or simply stayed home on Election Day. In the end, Bush lost the election in a close, three-way race.

Ironically, Bush’s defeat was celebrated by the young rebels in the House GOP Conference. “Oh, man, yeah, it was fabulous,” said Rep. Tom DeLay (R-TX), who feared a second Bush term meant “another four years of misery.” DeLay’s opinion was characteristic among Republican members of the House. Twelve consecutive years of Republican presidents had not brought about the majority that had eluded the GOP since 1954. In fact, during the Reagan-Bush years, the NRCC had spent $260 million trying to win back the House, but paradoxically GOP numbers were reduced from 192 in 1981 to 176 in 1993.

Despite Bush’s defeat, Republicans picked up nine seats in the House. More significantly, the freshman class consisted of 110 members—47 Republicans and 63 Democrats—the most since World War II. A record number of retirements had occurred in the run-up to the 1992 elections as a result of two scandals that broke in early 1992 involving the House bank and post office. For years, the House bank had allowed members to bounce checks with no penalties and the post office allowed them to convert their allowances for stamps to cash. When these scandals broke, a group of seven Republican freshmen—the so-called Gang of Seven—joined together to force the Democratic leadership to release a full
list of those who had overdrafts, even if it meant releasing the names of Republicans as well. Memorably, Rep. Jim Nussle of Iowa appeared on the House floor with a paper bag over his head, claiming he was embarrassed to be recognized as a member of the House.

The 1992 GOP freshmen were largely cut in the Gang of Seven mold. They were young, conservative, and nearly all of them had benefitted directly from GOPAC materials. Their impact was immediately felt in early December when the Conference held its organizing meeting to elect its leaders for the 103rd Congress. In each election, the younger, activist member won the position, a surprising sweep of the leadership posts that left Bob Michel as the lone traditionalist in the leadership.

The most surprising victory was won by Rep. Dick Armey of Texas, who defeated the incumbent chairman of the House GOP Conference, Jerry Lewis of California by a four-vote margin. Armey had come to Congress in 1984 and had long nurtured the image of an outsider, at one point living in his office as a demonstration of his disdain for the trappings of power. “My heart is in Texas,” he said, “not with the Washington establishment.” Lewis was of the Michel school, a man who preferred compromise to confrontation and often worked with Democrats closely on the Appropriations Committee. Gingrich openly supported Armey in the race, and his election was aided by nearly 30 votes from the freshman class. Freshman Ernest Istook of Oklahoma said that Armey’s victory demonstrated that “the majority of Republican members agree we need an aggressive tack to highlight the differences between Republicans and Democrats on taxes, spending, and overregulation.”

Before his defeat, Lewis was seen as the main challenger to Gingrich for Michel’s job as Leader when Michel retired, and he blamed Gingrich for his defeat: “There’s little
question that Newt felt if there was a competitor on the leadership ladder who might be in the way, it was probably me. So early on, I was moved out of the way.”

The result of the leadership races was clear to all—all the positions save the Leader’s were filled by activist members, continuing the trend that brought Gingrich to the Whip’s position in 1989. It was clear that the House GOP Conference was restless. But in the 1992 defeat, they recognized a valuable opportunity. With the Republican Party in turmoil, they realized that they had a once-in-a-generation chance to dramatically change the leadership and convince more moderate members to try a new tack, because the old one, so went the argument, certainly wasn’t working.

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Expectations were high when William Jefferson Clinton took the oath of office as president on January 20, 1993. He was the first Democrat to occupy the Oval Office in twelve years and he enjoyed large Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, the first president since Jimmy Carter to lead a unified government. Moreover, Clinton had toppled a president who had seemed unbeatable—George H.W. Bush’s approval ratings were near 90 percent just a year before his defeat—running on a New Democrat agenda that promised to deliver results addressing the nation’s greatest problems in a sensible, moderate way.

Nevertheless, Clinton was a student of history, and he was determined to avoid the mistakes made by the last Democratic Administration, that of Jimmy Carter. Chief among Carter’s problems was his relationship with Congress, where he failed to heed the touchy sensitivities of the congressional barons and paid for it for four years. Carter’s ineptitude relating to the Congress stemmed from his anti-Washington beliefs. To him, Washington politics was a secondary concern, something that was unsavory and not only a little sordid.
When then-Speaker Tip O’Neill met with Carter for the first time, the president-elect explained his proposed legislative program, whereupon O’Neill advised him to consult such and such subcommittee chairs. Carter chafed at the suggestion and cavalierly stated that he would go over their heads to appeal to the American people. “At that precise moment Tip knew they were in trouble,” said longtime O’Neill aide Gary Hymel.166

When he came to the White House, he brought with him a Georgia “mafia” of advisors, few of whom had any experience in Washington and many with unrealistic preconceptions. “Too many of Carter’s people—especially Hamilton Jordan, the president’s top aide—came to Washington with a chip on their shoulder and never changed,” said O’Neill. “They failed to understand that the presidency didn’t operate in a vacuum, that Congress was fundamentally different from the Georgia legislature, and that we intended to be full partners in the legislative process.”167 To show his contempt for Jordan, O’Neill began to refer to the president’s chief of staff as Hannibal Jerkin, privately of course, but to enough friends and members of the press that he ensured word got around.

The Carter Administration couldn’t even perform the most basic political tasks. Rep. John Brademas (D-IN), the Majority Whip, had to spell his name whenever he called the White House.168 Rep. Jim Wright (D-TX) asked the administration for three jobs to reward supporters; he got one part-time position. No one bothered to inform Rules Committee Chairman Jim Delaney (D-NY) when his son was dropped from a list of nominees to the Securities and Exchange Commission.169 The result was four years of frustration and discouragement.

Bill Clinton and his staff were determined to avoid the same fate. “There was a terrific fear in the first year that he [Clinton] would become like Carter,” said Clinton aide
Paul Begala. The day after his election, the *New York Times* succinctly summed up the challenge Clinton would face: “a largely Democratic but freewheeling group of legislators who hunger for results but chafe at discipline, unaccustomed to dealing with a president of their own party and used to calling the shots for the party themselves.”

To help him manage Congress, Clinton surrounded himself with advisors with close ties to Congress: George Stephanopoulos had worked in Majority Leader Richard Gephardt’s (D-MO) office; Leon Panetta, initially Office of Management and Budget Director and later Chief of Staff, had been a Democratic congressman from California since 1977. “At almost every turn,” journalists Dan Balz and Ronald Brownstein reported, “these advisors urged cooperation, not confrontation, with Congress as the way to steer clear of Carter’s difficulties.”

During the third week of the transition, Clinton invited Speaker of the House Tom Foley, House Majority Leader Gephardt, and Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell to Little Rock. As Clinton later acknowledged, “It was important for me to get off on the right foot with the Democratic leaders. I knew I had to have their support to succeed.” At the meeting, the congressional leaders urged Clinton to shelve his campaign promise of campaign finance reform and welfare reform. Unwilling to alienate his congressional allies, Clinton agreed, and thus strayed from the centrist message of his campaign before he had even taken office. The voters were expecting one thing, but Clinton and the congressional Democrats were about to give them another.

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For all the promise Clinton portended on his inauguration day, his first few months in office did not meet the hype. His first nominee for attorney general, Zoe Baird, had to
withdraw her nomination after it was discovered that she had hired illegal aliens as nannies and had not paid Social Security taxes for them, a scandal the press soon labeled “Nannygate.”*174 His first two major acts in office were “to announce a new policy admitting open homosexuals to the military, which he was soon forced to withdraw, and to shelve the middle-class tax cut that had been promised in the campaign, replacing it with a substantial tax increase.”*175 Clinton could not even make small, personal decisions without facing negative results. His decision to visit an expensive Beverly Hills coiffeur for a $200 haircut while Air Force One blocked two runways at Los Angeles International Airport for nearly an hour was ridiculed in the press and among the public.*176

At the end of his first four months in office, Clinton had not much to show for himself beyond sinking poll numbers and public dissatisfaction. A Time/CNN poll on June 7, 1993 found that Clinton’s approval rating was at a dismal 36 percent and fully 50 percent of the public disapproved of his performance.*177 Most disturbing of all for the White House, 58 percent of the public now believed that Clinton was a “tax and spend liberal.”*178

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In addition to his troubles with Democrats, President Clinton confronted a reenergized Republican Party in full revolt, unwilling to accept him as president. Many conservatives believed “they were engaged in a war for the soul of America, and they viewed the election in 1992 of a draft-dodging, pot-smoking womanizer as an indication that they were losing the war.”*179 Clinton’s attempt to change the policy on gays in the military inspired a mass politicization of evangelical Christians, a group that until then had not played a significant role in electoral politics. The proposed tax increase in Clinton’s first budget brought anti-tax Americans back to the GOP. Indeed, Republican mistrust of Clinton went
so far in 1993 that 93 percent of Republicans believed the federal government “no longer represents the intents of the Founding Fathers.”

The anti-Clinton sentiment among Republicans was instrumental to the plans of Haley Barbour, the newly elected Chairman of the Republican National Committee. A genial Mississippian, Barbour had begun his career as a political operative on the Nixon campaign in 1968, and had later directed the Mississippi Republican Party and served as political director in the Reagan White House. Upon taking office as RNC Chairman, he inherited the chairmanship of a party in shambles. The number of registered Republicans was down, small donations had dried up, and the party lacked both an identity and a power base. To Barbour, the lesson of 1992 was clear: “We Republicans have to stand for something. For us to succeed, for us to win elections, people have to know what we believe in, and why, and to feel like we will adhere to those principles.”

Barbour began his quest to revitalize the party by commissioning a fifty-question survey to be sent to Republicans nationwide. He believed that after twelve years in the White House, Republicans in Washington had lost touch of the issues important to the rank and file. The secondary goal of the survey was to transform the image of the RNC as merely a solicitor of donations. “We had to stop and ask ourselves, ‘When was the last time we sent out a mailer that didn’t ask for money?’ recalled Barbour’s chief deputy Don Fierce. “No one knew.”

Of the 400,000 surveys that the RNC sent out, Barbour expected about 5 percent of them to be returned, but by mid-year, over 20 percent of them had been sent back. Portions of the survey had been simple ratings but others had been open-ended, and the quality of responses to the latter type of questions surprised Barbour the most, “I can’t imagine how
many barrels of ink got used on people writing on those surveys...And every single note and letter was read and recorded. This was a massive focus group.”

The survey’s results stressed a back-to-the-basics approach: lower taxes, smaller government, balanced budgets, welfare reform, defense spending, congressional reform, among others.

Also instrumental to reviving the RNC was Barbour’s efforts to create a communications unit. Under his leadership, the RNC created its own television programming channel under the name GOPTV, a magazine called *Rising Tide*, a think tank, and a fax program called “Haley’s Comments” that was sent to thousands of Washington insiders each day blasting Clinton “every time the president even glanced to his left.”

As President Clinton continued his missteps over the first few months of his term, Barbour ramped up the RNC’s fundraising operations and was handsomely rewarded. The message of the appeals was “red meat...one-hundred percent anti-Clinton,” Scott Reed, then the RNC’s Chief of Staff, put it. One letter attacked Clinton for supporting “far-out social concepts of diversity, multiculturalism and political correctness.” Money poured in from all over the country.

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The first major test of Clinton’s presidency began in the spring of 1993 when the Administration proposed its first budget. During the 1992 campaign, the president had promised a middle-class tax cut along with “investments” in social programs, but with the federal deficit swelling to $300 million, Clinton, in a move that harkened back to President Bush’s decision in 1990, was forced to shelve his promise in favor of cutting the deficit.

The president intended to combine a modest tax increase with cuts in social programs, but he quickly ran into stiff opposition from liberal congressional Democrats when he
discussed program cuts. “The discussion was, ‘This chairman won’t like this, this subcommittee chairman won’t like that,’” recalled Begala.\(^{187}\) Not wanted to ruffle feathers on Capitol Hill, the budget made no significant cuts and called for increasing the top tax bracket from 31 to 36 percent.

In proposing a budget that contained tax increases, Clinton was wary of the Republican whip Newt Gingrich. After all, Clinton observed, Gingrich had “skewered President Bush for signing the Democrats’ deficit-reduction package in 1990 [because it contained a moderate tax increase]...I could only imagine what he intended to do to me.”\(^{188}\)

Republicans were ecstatic when the budget was proposed. In Gingrich’s eyes, Clinton’s budget proved that “Clinton was not the moderate New Democrat he had promised during the campaign but just another old liberal Democrat who campaigned as a moderate.”\(^{189}\) The tax increases contained in the budget enabled Gingrich to get the entire Republican Conference to oppose the budget, and they were helped by moderate Democrats who felt abandoned by the promises of Clinton’s campaign. “We were achieving pretty fair unanimity in our conference…because it was easy to be against [what] the Administration wanted when it went hard left,” recalled Rep. Bob Walker (R-PA). “Centrist Democrats became in play for us because…the Democratic proposals were unsupportable in their districts.”\(^{190}\)

The Republicans, however, were not content with just opposing the Clinton budget. In late February, the Conference had gathered for a retreat in Princeton, New Jersey to plot their strategy for the year. There, the younger activist members continued to make their mark on the Conference: “A core group of members, Jim Nussle, John Boehner, and Martin Hoke, stood up and were saying, ‘We have to be for something, we cannot just be against
Bill Clinton. We have to provide an alternative vision of government,” remembered Ed Gillespie, who was then Conference Chairman Dick Armey’s press secretary. At the conference, it was decided that the House Republican minority would write a budget under the leadership of the Budget Committee’s ranking member, John Kasich (R-OH). Although the Republicans’ budget was later defeated, the idea of a minority writing its own budget was unprecedented, and showed that Republicans were not blindly opposing Clinton.

On August 5, after months of wrangling, Clinton’s budget bill passed by a single vote in the House, as President Clinton personally called dozens of members to ask for their votes, a tactic rarely employed by a president. All 175 Republicans voted against the bill and they were joined by 41 Democrats. The next day, the Senate passed the budget 51-50, with Vice President Al Gore casting the deciding vote. Clinton had gotten his budget, but it had been a Pyrrhic victory. The struggle left a lasting image of chaos between Democrats. On the other side of the aisle, Republicans “felt strength in unity and had a weapon for the next election to use against those Democrats who had supported the president.”

Democrats paid for Clinton’s first-year blues that November, as Republicans elected governors in Virginia and New Jersey and mayors in New York City and Los Angeles. Much of the problem with the Clinton presidency was that he continued to allow the Democrats in Congress to shape his agenda. At different points in the year, Clinton complained that he felt tied to Congress “like Ahab to Moby Dick, with the same results.” Paul Begala was even more frank: “We took Secretariat and hooked him to a ---ing plow.” Only President Clinton’s victory in passing the North American Free Trade Act, in which Republicans delivered the deciding votes and Newt Gingrich played a crucial role, prevented an entire year of frustration for the new president.
In October 1993, Bob Michel announced his retirement from the House effective at the close of the 103rd Congress. First elected in 1957, Michel served as the Republican whip from 1975 to 1981 and as leader from 1981 to 1995. Genial and respected on both sides of the aisle, Michel was, according to Rep. Denny Hastert, “unassuming and unfailingly polite, he led by quiet example.” To younger Republicans like Tom DeLay, Michel’s announcement signaled that “the ‘old bulls’ of the Republican Party were letting go of the controls.” Privately, they celebrated his decision, because they believed that younger leadership could finally bring the GOP to the majority. “As soon as Bob Michel retires,” recalled Dick Armey, “I know a majority is possible, because the old bulls are going to get out of the way.”

Michel and Newt Gingrich had worked side-by-side since Gingrich’s election as whip in 1989, but tension between the two leaders was always present. Whereas Gingrich represented the more conservative, activist side of the party, Michel was of the older, accomodationist wing, more willing to compromise than confront. As the composition of the GOP Conference became younger, however, Gingrich became the de facto leader, and finally in August 1993 Gingrich instructed his staff to inform Michel that Gingrich would challenge him for his post if he didn’t leave Congress in 1994. “We let him [Michel] know we were running and to make plans accordingly,” remembered Tony Blankley, Gingrich’s spokesman at the time. “Yes, he was given the old heave-ho.” Even Democrats took notice. As former Speaker of the House Tom Foley explained, “It was an open secret that he [Gingrich] had threatened Michel that, if he ran for Leader again, that he would oppose him.”
Following the announcement, Gingrich quickly locked up his position as Leader-designate and began to take day-to-day control of the House Republican Party. Michel was still consulted on all important decisions and acted as the leader, but ceded to Gingrich the informal reins of power. “To his great credit, Michel presided over one of the smoothest transitions of power I’ve ever witnessed,” remarked Armey. “He kept his hand in the big decisions but began to delegate responsibility for day-to-day decisions to the leadership at large and Newt in particular. This gave us a chance to form our own strategy—although always with Bob Michel’s approval and support.”

As Gingrich aide Jack Howard remembered:

“With each successive election—84, 86, 88, 90, 92—there was a new wave of Republicans that would come in, sometimes more sometimes not as many. By 1993, it was pretty clear that the people aligned with Newt had a majority in the Republican Conference. So Newt, from that standpoint, had somewhat of a mandate to lead an effort like that. And Bob Michel gradually became Newt more responsibility especially as it became clear that Newt would become the presumptive Republican leader.”

Soon after the leadership elections following Michel’s announcement, Armey, Gingrich, DeLay, Robert Walker, and NRCC Chairman Bill Paxon (R-NY) began to have dinner meetings to plan their strategy to win the majority. “It was basically just five or six of us that met for dinner usually down in the basement of a taco place on Capitol Hill,” Bob Walker explained. “Newt put together this very small group of us who basically plotted the 1994 election.” “It truly had the feel of a guerrilla operation,” recalled Paxon. “We were the minority of the minority.”

The five men had little in common. The only true friends were Gingrich and Walker, who had founded the Conservative Opportunity Society together in 1983. In fact, rivalries
existed in the group as well. DeLay and Walker were both candidates for the whip position that Gingrich would soon vacate. “They could have been petty and tried to undercut each other,” Armey said, “They did just the opposite.” The meetings were also the beginning of the relationship between Newt Gingrich and Dick Armey, a partnership that would eventually become quite close and would lead the Republicans to the majority. As Gingrich aide Len Swinehart recalled, “Newt concluded that in a post-Michel conference, if he and Armey were together, they could get the conference to do anything.”

In his first year as Republican Conference Chairman, Armey had done a lot to revitalize his position. As his former chief of staff and Conference Executive Director Kerry Knott explained, “There was no real map as to what the Conference Chairman should do besides hold meetings once a week. So we decided to make this the communications and coalitions hub of the Conference. Ed Gillespie, who was our communications director, and I began to think about how we could get all Republicans to focus on a few key issues?” Armey, Knott, and Gillespie created Conference publications, a blast fax capability, talking points, and other materials to keep people on message.

The dinner meetings were primarily political; that is to say that they dealt with the elections but still combined some of the old tactics of the COS. “Most of the meetings were about the election, but mainly about using the legislative process to frame the election,” Walker recalled. “It was out of those meetings that we began to discuss, ‘OK, how do we frame our agenda in a way that is attractive to the American people?’”

In the beginning, the group believed that a fifteen to twenty seat gain in the 1994 elections was realistic, and that a majority would not be within reach so soon. An October 21, 1993 memo from Armey to Gingrich explained, “We have a great chance to pick up seats
(although I believe realistic gains are fifteen to twenty rather than the wild numbers we hear others suggest).” Yet unlike in previous years when the GOP leadership merely assumed minority status, Armey urged Gingrich to begin planning for a majority:

“I would like for you and the rest of the leadership to propose a comprehensive plan (well thought out and prepared in advance) for House Republicans to reach the majority. At this point, I’m afraid that a large number of our Members just don’t understand the intensity and sheer effort that will be required for us to be successful. We need to lay out a plan and sell them on it. I believe most of our Conference is hungry for direction and is hungry for a full scale effort to try to gain control of the House. It may take a long time to persuade our Conference that the sacrifice it will take is necessary, but I believe we can do it.” 206

On January 28, 1994, the GOP leadership got their chance when the Republican Conference gathered for their annual retreat at Salisbury State University in eastern Maryland. Usually, these retreats were plush affairs, complete with banquet rooms, fancy hotels, lobbyists, donors, and press. This time, however, the Conference, as Armey recalled, “stayed in student dormitory rooms, ate in student cafeterias, and met in a large room in the student union building working out our plans to rebuild the Republican Party.” 207

The Republican Conference was restless, and certainly not as willing as Gingrich and Armey to admit their failings. As Republican pollster Frank Luntz recalled:

“I had Gingrich and Armey constantly telling me, “Don’t kiss up to these guys, don’t suck up to them. They need to be told the truth. They need to be told how much trouble they’re in. Shake them up, Frank.” So I let loose, and I went way overboard…I remember getting into an argument with Tom DeLay where he said, “Frank, it was a Republican landslide”—this was after the 1993 elections where Republicans won the governor of New Jersey, they won the mayor of LA, they won the mayor of New York, they won all over in 1993. And I said, “No, sir. It was not pro-Republican, it was pro-challenger, anti-incumbent.” There were 104 members in the room and they were really pissed at me.” 208
Because of the victories in 1993, many Republican congressmen were content on running on an anti-Clinton platform. After all, the president’s popularity was low, confidence in his administration was even lower, and Republicans were on the favorable end of a historical trend that stated that the party out of power in the White House gained congressional seats in the midterm elections. However, in the dinner meetings, the leadership had decided that a solely anti-Clinton campaign would not allow them to pick up enough seats to gain a majority. “All you had to do was run against the Clinton Administration and you were going to pick up seats, which was where most of the Republican Conference was,” recalled Bob Walker. “What this small group said was if all we do is run against the Clinton Administration, all we will have at the end of the day is a victory based upon the fact that we weren’t friends of Bill Clinton. What we need is to bring the election based upon a set of principles that we have laid out that we are going to pursue should we become the majority.”

To this end, the GOP leadership brought with them to Salisbury the idea of forming a mission statement and developing a specific legislative agenda to run on that November. Many younger members were enthusiastic about the idea, but most of the Conference was indifferent or, worse, opposed. The leadership faced the strongest opposition from the more senior Republican “Old Bulls.” “None of them believed we were going to win the majority, so they thought, What was the point?” Gingrich aide Dan Meyer later explained. “Even as a campaign tactic, they thought, ‘What’s the purpose? Because we aren’t going to win the majority anyway.’”

Nevertheless, Gingrich and Armey were unperturbed, because Gingrich’s strategy, as his staffer Jack Howard later explained, didn’t require 100 percent of the members to buy
into it: “Newt’s theory was, he said, ‘If we can get 20 to 30 percent of the members to buy in to this, you might have 10 percent who will be hard-core against but the rest will just sort of go along.’” However, Gingrich did pull off an important victory at Salisbury when he won adoption of a mission statement that united the Conference behind the common goal of becoming a majority party in 1995. As Armey later remarked, “This may sound simplistic, but House Republicans had never before really operated as a team to accomplish a common goal.” The mission statement included fealty to five politically conservative values: individual liberty, limited government, economic opportunity, personal responsibility, and security at home and abroad.

The Salisbury retreat was truly one of the important turning points in the campaign to make the Republican Party the majority party in the House of Representatives. The Conference went through a significant bout of soul-searching over that weekend, taking the time, as Rep. Deborah Price (R-OH) put it, “to take a hard look at who we were as a party, where we were going, and what we stood for.” “It was there that the feeling started to come together that this election should be more than just about us taking power or being against the Democrats. We needed a positive agenda,” recalled NRCC Chairman Bill Paxon.

Near the end of the retreat, Gingrich and Armey persuaded the Conference to develop a concept for the fall campaign tentatively titled, “Ten Things House Republicans Will Do If We Take Over the Majority.” Eventually, this concept would become the much-heralded Contract with America, the campaign and governing plan of the House Republicans in the fall campaign and beyond. In the aftermath of the Salisbury retreat, the Contract, although it
had not yet been named, would become the centerpiece of the efforts of Gingrich, Armey, and the rest of the Republican Conference.

The retreat was also a personal victory for Gingrich. Salisbury was the first time that he was on his own, without Michel, and truly had to lead his fellow Republicans. “In a lot of ways, that’s sort of where Newt’s leadership was the most difficult and on display,” recalled Howard. “He forced them to do things broader than just the legislative component of the Contract with America. He forced them to do things they had never done before, like a vision statement that described who the House Republicans were, what they stood for, what their vision for America was, and what strategies they were going to employ to make that happen.”

The first three years of the 1990s were truly years of self-discovery for the House Republican Party. Following the activist model set by Gingrich in the 1980s, and willing to trust his leadership by electing him Whip in 1989, the House Republicans continued to move in an activist direction during the presidency of George H.W. Bush. The budget battle of 1990 and the eagerness that many in the Conference displayed to challenge a president of their own party enabled House Republicans to form their own political identity in a way that they had not been able to do since Ronald Reagan first took office in 1981. The Conference was restless; it was tired of blindly following the lead of the White House and sacrificing its own creativity in favor of helping the president.

Although the 1992 election was widely viewed as a fiasco for the Republican Party, Gingrich and the House GOP wisely saw this setback as a momentous opportunity. Freed from the paternalism of a Republican president, the House Republicans were able to put the
autonomy they had created for themselves during the last years of the Bush presidency to work during the presidency of Bill Clinton. Upon Clinton’s inauguration, the House GOP was immediately ready to perform the role of an opposition party, a role that Gingrich and the Conservative Opportunity Society had been practicing against the House Democratic leadership for over a decade and one they were only happy to reprise on a much bigger scale.

Indeed, Clinton provided an easy target. After running a campaign that stressed centrism, working together, and sensible solutions, Clinton quickly disappointed the American people by failing to deliver on his campaign promises. His intense desire to avoid the congressional troubles of the last Democratic president, Jimmy Carter, caused Clinton to acquiesce to the policy preferences of the decidedly more liberal congressional wing of his party, a group of people who, under Republican presidents for the previous twelve years, were not used to taking orders from anyone but themselves. The upshot of this relationship was sinking popularity, images of disorganization and chaos, and the destruction of the desperately wanted Clinton image of a centrist New Democrat in favor of a new image as a “tax and spend liberal.” Republicans couldn’t have been more delighted.

More importantly, however, was the unity that the House Republicans would come to experience as a result of their position as the minority party in relation to the House of Representatives as well as the White House. The disillusionment and disaffection that the national Republican Party was going through forced the House GOP Conference to genuinely take a look at who they were and what they stood for. This soul-searching, on one hand, manifested itself in the election of activists to the leadership in December 1992. Although the whole Conference didn’t agree with the activist and conservative tendencies of Dick
Armey and Tom DeLay, enough members, moderates included, were willing to give them a shot to lead the Republican Party in opposition to President Clinton.

Over the course of 1993, as it became clear that Clinton was having significant trouble in his first year as president, the House Republican Conference grew more confident in their chances for a large gain in the 1994 midterms. They had history on their side—the opposition party on average gained twenty seats in a president’s first midterm—but more than that, their leaders believed that this might be the best chance in forty years to win the majority. Beginning with the dinner meetings and continuing at the Salisbury retreat, these leaders began to put together a plan to unify the entire Conference behind a plan to win the majority only two years after they had been roundly trounced on the national stage.

Going into 1994, the Republicans had all the momentum. Perhaps the greatest victory of the year for them was convincing enough of the Conference that the centerpiece of the 1994 campaign could not just be an anti-Clinton message, but rather a positive message that espoused their ideals and ideas directly to the American people. Clinton’s unpopularity would take them halfway to a majority, but only a positive message would get them all the way there.
Chapter 3: Putting Their Names on the Line

On the morning of September 27, 1994, as the sun poked through the previous evening’s rain clouds, a group of 367 Republican candidates for the House of Representatives left the Grand Hyatt hotel to make their way down 10th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue to the United States Capitol. It had rained until 2:00 a.m., threatening the precise choreography of an event that had been planned for nearly eight months. Indeed, September 27 had been picked for two reasons: it was six weeks before Election Day and Newt Gingrich’s long-range weather forecaster in Georgia had assured him in February 1994 that it would not rain that day. Thankfully for the candidates, he turned out to be right.

By midmorning, the candidates began to assemble on the steps of the West Front of the Capitol. To the casual observer, the scene might have looked like a Fourth of July parade. Flags were waving, bands were playing patriotic music, and speakers were tirelessly climbing the podium to give speeches exalting America. People crowded around and the press covered the event with rapt attention. Behind the mass of candidates was an enormous backdrop emblazoned with the words “Contract with America.”

The event was meticulously planned and geared toward the media. Press secretaries wore red “Contract with America” hats and stood by to answer questions from candidates or the media. Information packets had been prepared for the press containing candidates’ names, biographies, copies of the Contract with America, locations of where to get full-text bills, and other information. Organizers had determined that exactly nine cameras would be needed to capture every moment. Four lines were formed for candidates to come forward to
sign the Contract with America, the Republicans’ 1994 campaign pledge, each of them pausing for just a moment for a camera to capture the image for the folks back home. The ceremony was so precisely choreographed that its planners had built in time for “podium movement” so that everyone would be in their proper places as speakers ascended and descended the rostrum.216

Over 185 Republican challengers had come to Washington to sign the Contract, displaying their unity and fidelity to the principles of the document merely by showing up. A telltale sign was the fact that over forty of their Democratic opponents had thrown them mock goodbye parties and ran advertisements claiming that the Republicans were flying to Washington to join Newt Gingrich’s army.217

For Gingrich, who had been dreaming of this day since the fateful Capitol Steps Event of 1980, the public signing of the Contract with America marked the last phase in his decade-long struggle to create a Republican majority in the House of Representatives. As he confidently ascended the podium to give his speech, he could not help but to immortalize the significance of the day in his typically grand terms: “If the American people accept this Contract,” he proclaimed, “we will have begun the journey to renew American civilization. Together we can renew America. Together we can help every American fulfill their unalienable right to pursue happiness and to seek the American dream. Together we can help every human across the planet seek freedom, prosperity, safety, and the rule of law. That is what is at stake.”218 Though these words may have been overly extravagant, Gingrich truly believed that the direction of American society hung in the balance.

Between the Salisbury Retreat and the unveiling of the Contract with America on September 27, Gingrich and his colleagues in the Republican leadership had tirelessly
worked on the positive agenda that they believed would be instrumental in bringing the House Republican Conference the thing that had eluded them for four decades—a majority. Aided by a political climate hostile to President Clinton and an electorate aching for politicians to be held accountable to their promises, the Contract with America, they hoped, would provide the spark that would bring them control of the House.

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From his early days in Congress, Newt Gingrich had been a firm believer in nationalizing elections; that is to say framing them as referenda on national issues such as taxes or defense spending or welfare rather than on the earmarks a particular congressman brought home to his district. From the early days of the Conservative Opportunity Society, Gingrich and his cohorts had attempted to bring local attention to national issues, but to no avail. Before 1994, it seemed like Tip O’Neill’s maxim of “All politics is local” held sway.

However, Gingrich believed that this time would be different, not the least because of the Clinton Administration’s policies and unpopularity. He believed that the voters were restless, and that the frustration with national issues that won Clinton the White House in 1992 had not been addressed. Above all, Gingrich believed, the voters were crying out for politicians to be held accountable for their promises. The disappointment resulting from Clinton’s quick scrapping of his middle class tax cut in early 1993 in favor of an enormous tax increase served to further sour the electorate on political promises. With a Contract with America, Gingrich hoped that he would be able to show voters that if they gave the Republican Party a chance to be the majority party in the House of Representatives, something that had not occurred in four decades, the GOP would be the party that would make good on its campaign promises.
Yet he realized that merely running on anti-Clinton sentiment would not bring the Republicans the forty-seat gain they would need to win a majority. Instead, Republicans would have to create their own alternative agenda to complement their attacks. “I’ll give Newt a lot of credit for this,” Armey’s top staff member Kerry Knott said. “He said we can run a purely negative campaign against Clinton in ’94 and pick up a decent number of seats, but somewhere along the way it switched to where we thought, ‘Hey, if we were to put a positive agenda together with the negative attacks on Clinton that might be enough to actually make it all the way there.’”219 Years later, Gingrich agreed: “You had to have something of this scale to beat the Democratic majority.”220

Working from the five values spelled out in the mission statement adopted at Salisbury, Gingrich assigned Dick Armey to develop the specifics of the ten-point Contract with America, although it did not yet have a name. “Newt had this idea, ‘We’re going to announce this agenda on the steps of the Capitol before the election and give everybody chapter and verse. I don’t know how we’re going to do it, but Dick, take this over and make it happen,’” Knott recalled.221 As Armey later remembered, “My first reaction was to recall Tevia’s line in Fiddler on the Roof, ‘How did I come by this great honor?’ But my staff and I had already learned that one of Newt’s guiding principles was to ‘import knowledge, export work.’ In fact, the arrangements served us both well.”222

Armey charged his chief of staff Kerry Knott to draft and coordinate the overall plan. They began by brainstorming ideas based on the five broad values and came up with hundreds of policy options. These options were then distilled into a questionnaire and sent to all Republican incumbents and challengers. Pollster Frank Luntz was contracted to implement this survey, and about 70 percent completed it. The survey showed broad support
for, among other things, congressional reform, balanced budget, tax cuts, welfare reform, defense, crime control, term limits, a line item veto, anti-abortion, and school prayer. Luntz and other pollsters then conducted polls and focus groups around the country to test the two dozen or so items the survey supported. As Bob Walker later explained:

“We said well if it doesn’t poll at 60 percent--it had to poll at least 60 percent, you had to show us good definitive polls that what you were proposing could meet the 60 percent test—then we didn’t put it in the Contract because part of our goal here was to go to the American people and say, “We’re entering into a contract with you to do things that you absolutely want to have done.” If, in fact, what you did was put everybody’s favorite item in, even if it was polling at 30 percent, the American people would say well I agree with this, but this thing over here, I wouldn’t want a contract that says they are going to do that. So it was very important to the idea of the Contract to have things that were shared by the vast majority of the people. Most of the things in the Contract were polling at 75 or 80 percent.”223

To meet the 60 percent test, social issues like abortion and school prayer were immediately taken off the table. Although it was clear that many of the most ardent supporters of the Republican Party were strongly in favor of these items, Gingrich and the rest of the leadership decided to err on the side of unity. “The point was to unite the party in a referendum on the scope and cost of government,” said Armey.224

Moreover, the authors of the Contract did not want to turn off independent voters, especially those that had voted for Perot in 1992 (who ran on an anti-government platform that the rest of the Contract was designed to address). “I can say there was a conscious effort to attract the Perot vote in the ‘94 campaign, and one of the ways that manifested itself was there were no social issues in the Contract,” Joe Gaylord, one of Gingrich’s top political advisors, recalled. “Gingrich was very strong in saying, ‘We don’t want to turn anybody off with the Contract, so why would we put the most controversial things in there?’”225 The issue that social conservatives most wanted in the Contract was school prayer, but Gingrich
successfully prevented it from inclusion. As Luntz recalled, “Gingrich said to me, and I quote, ‘No way, I do not want Al Hunt running an op-ed claiming that Republicans are religious fanatics. I’m not going to give him that opportunity.’”226

Eventually, however, social conservatives were persuaded to sign and support the Contract (and by extension, the Republicans). As Bob Walker later explained:

“If we’re in the majority, obviously these issues that you’re concerned about will be on a friendlier stance with a Republican majority than they ever have been with a Democratic majority. So the fact that you don’t have it in the Contract doesn’t mean those items aren’t going to be pursued and are going to be ignored. It simply means that during our first 100 days when we are implementing the Contract, we are going to focus on it and the other items will come later.”

Social conservatives understood the reasoning behind this argument, and pledged heavy support for the Republicans in November. Although the Christian Right was still a minor player in national campaigns in the early 1990s, they were effective in turning their supporters out to vote. On the Sunday before the election, over 33 million voter guides published by the Christian Coalition (which stopped just short of endorsing candidates, but were clearly favorable to Republicans) were passed out in over 60,000 churches nationwide.227

Although Al Hunt never wrote a column attacking the relationship between Republicans and the Christian Right, Democrats ironically did a lot to solidify the bond shared by the two groups. Rep. Vic Fazio (D-CA), the chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, criticized Republicans for what he called their willingness to turn over their party to the “intolerant religious right,” an approach that backfired by merely intensifying evangelical opposition to the Democratic Party. Eventually,
evangelical Christians represented 20 percent of the votes cast on Election Day and they voted by a three-to-one ratio for Republicans.\textsuperscript{228}

As the chief architects of the Contract debated which items to include over the spring and summer of 1994, it was clear to them that the number of items was nearly as important as which proposals to include. Luntz took this issue into the field as well. The first focus groups were done with a contract of three items, but the scarcity of items was rejected by voters. Ten was quickly settled on as the optimal number. It was neither too few nor too many, rather a number that inspired respect at the same time as it inspired possibility. Ten was a symbolic number as well. It drew comparisons to the Bill of Rights— the first ten amendments to the Constitution—and to the Ten Commandments. Above all, GOP strategists were realists—they knew voters would reject a list of more than ten items as the normal laundry list of promises that seemed to be broken year after year. However, by choosing to include ten, Republicans hoped that they could get voters to take the Contract seriously. As GOP pollster Brian Tringali recalled, “Voters expected ten things. Three wasn’t enough. Ten things sounded as if it was ambitious enough but not too much. No one was interested in more than ten things, because that sounded like too much and too hard to do. The focus groups showed that voters actually took it seriously.”\textsuperscript{229} The decision to promise to accomplish the items in the first 100 days of the 104\textsuperscript{th} Congress was made on similar reasoning. Ever since Franklin Roosevelt’s first 100 days of his presidency, the accomplishments of the 100 days have been a measure of a new presidency. Gingrich wanted it to become a measure of a new Republican Congress as well.

Once the ten items—balanced budget and line–item veto, crime, welfare, senior citizens earning limit, family responsibility tax cuts, defense, legal reform, slashing
government regulations, and term limits, along with the institutional reforms of the House of Representatives—were decided, Knott organized working groups to draft specific legislation on each of these broad policy areas. By September, each of the ten items was backed by an already written and prepared bill, available for the public to look at before Election Day. This was an important difference from years past, and it played into the Republican theme of accountability and their goal of running a positive, ideas based campaign. Usually, political promises are reinforced by nothing except the word of the particular politician that is making the promise. However, by having completed bills ready to be introduced and available for the public to examine before the election, Republicans were able to effectively portray themselves as a party that would fulfill their promises, rather than just use them to get elected. “We made an early and controversial decision to draw up plans for the actual bills that would make up the Contract—fine print and all,” Armey recollected. “We felt that with the value of a politician’s or political party’s word at its lowest point ever…we had to be as explicit as possible.”

When forming the working groups, Knott generally avoided working with the most senior members, since many still believed that the Contract was a waste of time. “The old guys, the old bulls, they were laughing at us,” Armey recalled. “But they didn’t do it publicly. The fact of the matter is, we must have looked like a bunch of Don Quixotes to a lot of people.”

Instead, Knott concentrated on younger members, especially those who were less risk averse and more willing to create and test new ideas and concepts:

“We created lots of working groups. We got members who were not the ranking Republicans on the committees—we intentionally bypassed almost every one of them because we knew they would give us old, worn out ideas...
and their staffs would resist anything innovative—so we went and found members who had new ideas...Fortunately the committee staff and the ranking members virtually ignored us because they didn’t think this was a serious effort, so we were able to cobble together pretty good ideas that members came up with, staff came up with, and think tanks had come up with.”

By April, the groups had been formed and they were hard at work crafting specific policy under the broad headline of their particular issue. By June, Armey sent out a memo delineating the timetable for completion of the working groups’ work: “First cut, immediately; second cut, July 15; final cut, August 12; full GOP Conference approval, September 9.”

Ironically, had the old bulls taken the Contract more seriously from the outset, it would have been very likely that the final product would have been much different than what was actually produced. The older members typically were more risk-averse, more willing to compromise with the Democrats, and less conservative than the members chosen to write the Contract’s planks.

By June, nevertheless, the old bulls were taking the Contract seriously, and most were even excited about the fall campaign. This abrupt change came as a direct result of the special elections in Oklahoma and Kentucky in May. In both elections, the GOP candidates had managed to achieve come-from-behind victories in convincing fashion in districts that had traditionally voted Democratic. The victories turned the most reticent old bulls into passionate freshmen, ready to commit to the cause wholeheartedly. “The night we won that special election in Kentucky,” Paxon recalled, “the members came over for a big party and they were crying because they were so happy. It really provided a spark for a lot of our members to get enthused.”
Equally as important to building a Republican House majority as the ideas that were to become the Contract with America was the money that the party would have to raise to support their candidates through the fall elections. This realm of strategy was based in the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) under the leadership of its chairman, Rep. Bill Paxon (R-NY), and its executive director, Maria Cino.

Founded in 1866, the NRCC is the political arm of the House Republican Conference, generally responsible for giving support to Republican incumbent and challenger candidates for the House of Representatives. The NRCC provides financial assistance, research services, communication strategy, voter registration and turnout programs, and other services to candidates. Its chairman is elected by the House Republican Conference, and therefore for much of its history, the NRCC served as an incumbent support committee and put much of its financial resources behind incumbents. This was especially true under the chairmanship of Rep. Guy Vander Jagt (R-MI), who chaired the committee from 1976 to 1992.

The NRCC under Vander Jagt was notoriously ineffective. “Vander Jagt had been chairman for 18 years, and over time the NRCC had basically become a committee for incumbents,” Cino said. “Under my predecessor,” recalled Paxon, “it was a bizarre operation over there. He was very hands off, he had a fundraiser who was very controversial, he had an Executive Director who was asleep at the switch forever, and as a result they were complicit, in my opinion, in why we could never win a majority.”

During Vander Jagt’s tenure, the committee came under heavy criticism for using its resources ineffectually and wastefully. Between 1980 and 1992, the twelve years in which Republicans controlled the White House, the NRCC had spent $260 million to try to win
back the House and had a net drop of seats (from 192 to 176) to show for their efforts. In the words of Ed Rollins, who was in charge of the committee for the 1990 cycle, “We’ve spent a decade now in which the three buildings—the one I work in [NRCC], the one next door [RNC] and the Senate committee [NRSC]—have raised and spent over a billion dollars. That may have kept us somewhat in a minority status or it may have protected us from further annihilation. I can’t say which.”\(^{236}\) The committee was so ineffectual that one NRCC staffer said, “We should blow the place up.”\(^{237}\)

At the outset of the 1990s, the NRCC had been so badly run that it was nearly drowning in debt. The bureaucracy had grown so large that it seemed to many Republican candidates that for every dollar contributed to the NRCC, there was one less dollar for Republican candidates at the grassroots. Following Rollins’ resignation (unsurprisingly as a result of his disagreements with the way the committee was run), the NRCC went through several sets of leadership and staff, growing more and more bloated each time. Echoing the thoughts of many Republicans, Rep. Mickey Edwards said, “I’ve been saying for years that Democrats have been winning elections in the House because they don’t have an NRCC.”\(^{238}\)

By 1992, when Paxon was elected to replace Vander Jagt as chairman, the committee was over $4 million in debt, had a bloated staff of over 100 people, and had hundreds of outside consultants on the payroll. If the NRCC was ever going to help the Republicans win a majority, it had to first clean up its own house, a task that Paxon took to with relish. He first brought over his personal office’s chief of staff, Maria Cino, to be Executive Director, and the two of them began cleaning house at once. The first thing they had to address was their massive debt. “We had no money. We were one month away from bankruptcy several times. We had our bank wanting to call in our loans. Fortunately, we had a member who
was a former banker who helped us renegotiate our loans. We kind of hit the valley of the shadow of death in the summer of 1993,” Paxon said.239 “We struggled for the first six to eight months really trying to figure out how we keep ourselves afloat,” Cino remembered. “We had no money; we were running in the red…Along with a $2 million loan to the bank, we owed about $2.5 million in accounts payable to pollsters, media firms, and consultants.”240

Another problem was the enormous number of staffers the NRCC had on the payroll. Paxon and Cino took an approach in which no person’s job was safe and went through a systematic reorganization of the committee’s functions and personnel. As Cino recalled:

“We looked at every organization and said, OK, what do we do that’s unnecessary? For example, we had a TV studio. Well, the fact is that the TV studio was outdated, and we could not afford the equipment changes. What was happening was no one was using our studio because it was better and cheaper to go rent a studio somewhere else. So we were trying to maintain it for a couple of members. It was ridiculous! So we got rid of the TV studio and its staff…I basically looked at every single thing we did and said, OK how can this be done more cheaply and how do we run like a business and not like a fat and bloated committee?”241

In the one year between the 1992 election and the following December, the committee’s staff was down from over 100 to 25 and was not using any outside consultants.242 Among the staff members let go was Wyatt Stewart, the finance director, who had co-ownership of the direct-mail fundraising list, a dicey situation that was handled with care by Paxon and Cino. The result of the personnel cuts was a leaner, more dynamic, and streamlined NRCC. In place of the hired help, Paxon and Cino turned to members of the Republican Conference. As Paxon recalled, “We literally put together dozens of committees of members who would come over every day…Members took back ownership of the NRCC. We had members making calls, writing checks, and participating.”243 “When we got there,
we put together an Executive Committee of twelve members of Congress that we met with every few weeks to report where we were,” said Cino. “We had an Audit Committee, an Incumbent Support Committee, a Fundraising Committee, a Candidate Recruitment Committee, and so on. We wanted members dealing with members.”

Under Paxon’s leadership, the NRCC also revolutionized its fundraising operation, arguably the most important task of all the Hill committees. “Up until then, the NRCC had generally collected money through direct mail all across the country. They never asked the members to do anything—not recruit candidates, not campaign, not contribute money. Actually, Vander Jagt would hand out checks to members who were even unopposed. So, members loved it; they weren’t asked to do anything politically and they got a check!” he said. Once he took charge, Paxon immediately discontinued this system and instead decided to institute a dues system for members of the Republican Conference. Freshmen would be asked to give a minimum of $2,500, rank and file members $5,000, and ranking members and members of the leadership $7,500. “We said to the members, no more checks, you are going to help us,” Paxon recalled. “We told incumbents, well, if you’re an incumbent you should be able to raise your own money,” Cino said. “In addition to that, we said, if you ever want to be in the majority, you should pay us.” This money formed an “incumbent support program,” which would be used to fund Republican incumbents whose reelection bids were in trouble. “It was like an insurance policy,” Cino said, “you hope, like insurance, that you never have to use the money, but if you do, we’ll have it for you. But then, any additional money we raise will not go to incumbents, it will go to challengers.” To dissuade members from asking for their incumbent support funds back, Paxon and Cino
established a peer review committee composed of a dozen members who would have to approve any withdrawals from the incumbent support account.

Although the plan was favored by the leadership, it met with stiff opposition from many members, who, because of the campaign finance rules of the era, viewed their campaign accounts as their own money. “Members were very upset at me. They saw their campaign accounts as their personal fiefdom because back then if you left Congress you could keep that money for yourself…Literally, we had members scream at us or cry over making these contributions,” Paxon remembered.\textsuperscript{249} Eventually, peer pressure took hold. It was well known who had money in the bank and who was running unopposed, and over time as the excitement and anticipation of big gains in 1994 became more pronounced, it was easier for the NRCC to collect money. In the last six months of 1993, the committee raised $210,460 from GOP members.\textsuperscript{250}

This fundraising program was only one of the many that Paxon and Cino instituted to fund the 1994 campaign. A separate fund was created for challenger races, and Paxon and Cino relied heavily on ranking members and those in safe districts to contribute from their own accounts or call their own donors to give directly to a particular challenger. As Cino recalled, “We would say, here are ten of the closest races, would you please max-out [contribute as much money as legally allowed] to these ten?”\textsuperscript{251} Moreover, the NRCC began to ask national Republican figures who were outside of the Congress to help out with fundraising. Former Presidents Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush all signed NRCC fundraising appeals, and so did people like former Vice President Dan Quayle, former HUD Secretary Jack Kemp, and former Defense Secretary Dick Cheney.\textsuperscript{252}
The NRCC finally paid off their debt eighteen months after Paxon took charge in June 1994. By that time, the NRCC had completely revamped its operations to be ready for the fall campaign. The NRCC then turned its attention to raising money for challenger and open-seat races.

In the aftermath of the Oklahoma and Kentucky upsets, Gingrich and the leadership decided to take advantage of the widespread enthusiasm within the Republican Conference to raise money for non-incumbent Republican candidates. On July 18, Gingrich sent a memo to all members of the Conference outlining an ambitious fundraising strategy whose goal was to raise an astonishing $8.5 million by Election Day. He rested his reasoning on a quote from legendary football coach Vince Lombardi: “The team that doesn’t break in the fourth quarter wins.”

Gingrich laid out four fundraising options for each member: 1) Commit 148,000 for challenger and open seats; 2) Raise $50,000 for the NRCC; contribute $5,000 to challenger/open-seat candidates; 3) Do both 1 & 2; or 4) Design a fundraising program based on your personal strengths and interests that will yield $65,000. This was the first time that incumbent members had been ordered to fundraise for challenger candidates.

Although there was some grumbling about the requirements, the opposition was remarkably tame. Describing the plan, Gingrich political advisor Joe Gaylord said, “This is not a go-or-no proposition, this is a go proposition. How you want to be helpful and how you can make it better will be smiled upon. You can be an asshole and be opposed, but this is the gamble that we’re staking this election on.”

Gingrich got strong support from the old bulls. Thomas Bliley of Virginia, ranking member of the Energy and Commerce Committee, raised half a million, and so did Bill Archer of Texas, who was ranking member of Ways and
Means. John Kasich, ranking member on the Budget Committee, and Pat Roberts, ranking member on Agriculture, raised several hundred thousand each. By Election Day, 130 of the 178 House Republican incumbents had made contributions totaling $5 million, compared to only $50,000 in 1992.255

As the summer progressed, the working groups continued to fine-tune their policy proposals for eventual inclusion in the Contract. The work was going well, and Armey’s deadlines were going to be met with no problems. By that time, however, outside events had conspired to further strengthen Republican chances of a big win in November and served to create even more fertile ground for the unveiling of the Contract with America.

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Throughout the first year of his presidency, tensions between Bill Clinton and the Democrats in Congress had been on the rise. This was especially evident in the debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement, when dozens of liberal Democrats refused to back the president. In fact, Clinton had to rely on the Republicans and Newt Gingrich to pass the bill. “If NAFTA passes,” USA Today wrote, “Clinton will owe thanks to Minority Whip Newt Gingrich.”256 Eventually Gingrich brought along 132 GOP votes, more than half of the 234 the bill received.

The great battle of the first half of the Clinton presidency, however, was the congressional debate over his health care plan, and in this debate, tensions between House Democrats and the White House exploded. By the time Clinton took office, the health care issue had quickly become one of the nation’s top domestic priorities. Over 40 million Americans were uninsured and skyrocketing costs posed an enormous problem to government and business. In a special election to fill a U.S. Senate seat in Pennsylvania in
1991, health care was revealed to be an issue that strongly appealed to suburban voters, precisely the demographic that Clinton needed to capture in 1992. Thus, one of the centerpieces of his presidential campaign was health care reform, promising action within the first two years of his presidency.

Once Clinton took office, he appointed his wife Hillary and Ira Magaziner, an Oxford classmate of the president’s, to lead the his Task Force of Health Care Reform, which drafted a plan that combined government intervention with cost-saving managed competition. The plan was unveiled in September 1993, but had been in the works for almost a year. Almost immediately, it was assailed by the Republicans, with Newt Gingrich calling it “culturally alien to America,” and consisting of “1,300 pages of red tape.” One of the major problems with the bill was that it was simply too big and unwieldy. Clinton was urged by many Democrats and Republicans to split the bill into four smaller bills and work to pass one a year in each year of Clinton’s term. As Democratic strategist Peter Fenn recalled, “The health care bill was too complicated. No one could work out all the details. And some of us told the White House, ‘If you’re thinking about doing health care in ’94, you’re going to get whacked. You won’t get it done.’”

Clinton ignored this advice and tried to push his comprehensive plan through Congress as quickly as possible, an outcome that was clearly impossible given the nature and size of the bill. As House Speaker Tom Foley (D-WA) recalled, “I remember Ira Magaziner coming up and saying that there were 740 decisions on the decision tree—this is industrial policy-speak—that had to be made before the bill could be drafted. This was April [1993]. And they wanted the bill passed by Christmas. It was totally unrealistic.” One of the reasons for this was the fragmented nature of the legislative process on Capitol Hill. The
Clinton Health care Plan was sent to five House committees and two Senate committees, each for its own sessions of hearings, markups, and amendments. This fragmented process gave the bill’s opponents multiple points from which to attack and denied its supporters the ability to mobilize around a unified effort. The problem was compounded by the lack of unity within Democratic ranks. The passage of NAFTA had ruffled a lot of Democratic feathers, and the party was divided on its support for the individual elements of the health care proposal. Also, moderates, most notably Rep. Jim Cooper (D-TN), proposed their own versions of health care reform that siphoned off support from the Clinton bill.

The long, drawn-out battle gave outside interest groups time to mount a full scale attack on the plan. Businesses, including Pizza Hut and JCPenny, conducted a massive letter-writing campaign to assail its tax and employer mandate aspects. Health care interest groups launched a devastating ad campaign that included the famed “Harry and Louise” ad that featured a middle class couple fretting over the complexity and bureaucratic nature of the Clinton plan. These ads seized on the main reason for its tepid public support—its complexity. The bill was too big, too hard to explain, and too radical to be done all at once. “The bill was a radical bill,” Speaker Foley recalled. “It was an attempt to do a dramatic remake of the entire health care system of the United States, which was occupying 14 percent of the GDP, for God’s sakes!”

Building from a solid base of opposition among the public at large, the Republicans pounced. “It was a vastly more aggressive Republican Conference that the Clinton Administration was up against than anything anybody had seen prior to that,” explained Bob Walker. United after Salisbury and energized by their secret work on the Contract with America and the special election victories in May 1994, the Republicans gleefully attacked...
the Clinton health care program in the spring and summer. Initially, Bob Dole and Bob Michel had shown willingness to compromise, but as the political tide turned against Clinton, the entire Republican Party resolved to oppose any health care plan by any means available. This was simple politics; the Republicans did not want to give Clinton and the Democrats anything to run on in 1994.

As part of the steps to organize opposition to the Clinton plan, Republican strategist William Kristol, who had served as former Vice President Quayle’s chief of staff, sent a memo to top Republicans in which he argued against compromise with Clinton: “The first step…must be the unqualified political defeat of the Clinton health care proposal. Its rejection by Congress and the public would be a monumental setback for the president…and a watershed in the resurgence of newly bold and principled Republican politics.”

Gingrich and Dole adopted this position. Gingrich opposed any amendments to the bill in the House for fear they would garner additional support. Dole led a filibuster in the Senate that prevented a vote. After over a year had passed, it was declared dead in September 1994.

Much like the budget bill the year before, the failure of health care reform drove the president’s approval ratings into the low forties. The public’s image of the Clinton White House was a government that was too bureaucratic, too fragmented, too disorganized, and too radical. Additionally, the failure of Clinton’s health care plan reinforced the idea of promises broken in the Clinton Administration, especially since the bill was to be the centerpiece of Clinton’s domestic program. These feelings drove them directly to the Republicans. “I always said Hillary’s health care plan had more to do with us winning the majority in ’94 than the Contract did,” said Armey. “Because I think the Democrats in ‘93 and ‘94 scared the devil out of the American people. They did a grievous overreach.”
Following the president’s failure to pass his health care bill, he turned to another issue he believed would brandish his moderate credentials—crime. Republicans had been assailing Democrats as soft on crime for years, and the Willie Horton ads used in 1988 against Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis underscored the Democrats’ vulnerability on this issue. In the 1992 campaign, Clinton had charted a middle course by vocally supporting the death penalty and talking tough on crime. In 1994, he sought to implement a crime bill that included funds for hiring 100,000 new police officers.

Nevertheless, Newt Gingrich and the Republicans decided to reframe the debate on the crime bill by focusing on two of its more controversial issues: the assault weapons ban and $7.3 billion for “crime prevention programs,” which conservatives basically saw as pork barrel spending for liberal projects. The assault weapons ban was the most important facet of the bill, and Gingrich was successful in raising the ire of gun owners around the country, and especially the ire of National Rifle Association, an interest group committed to protecting individuals’ right to bear arms. The NRA would eventually spend millions of dollars during the fall campaign to defeat Democrats who had voted for the crime bill, and was largely successful in their efforts.

Although Clinton was desperately trying to steer a moderate course, he and his staff could simply not stay ahead of the issues, shape the debate, and receive credit for their victories during the first two years of his presidency. The success that Republicans had in redefining his agenda, controlling the terms of debate, and blaming Clinton for the legislative process’ failures was indicative of a White House that was unfocused at best and ineffectual at worst. As historian Steven Gillon writes, “Even when Clinton won—on the budget,
NAFTA, and the crime bill—Gingrich either managed to share credit with the White House or force the president to pay a heavy political price.”

Clinton placed much of the blame on the media, which he said gave him unfair treatment. To a point, he was right; a study done by the Center for Media and Public Affairs found that 62 percent of the evaluations of the Clinton presidency on the network evening newscasts were negative. However, as political scientists James Ceaser and Andrew Busch have written, Clinton’s “problem with public centered on the discrepancies between the principles he processed in the 1992 campaign and his actions in office.” The abandonment or half-hearted pursuit of his campaign promises in 1992 did not sit well with the public, bringing Clinton’s approval ratings to only 40 percent in a September 1 Time/CNN poll, the lowest level at this point in a presidency in four decades.

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Instrumental to the negative perception many voters had of President Clinton’s performance in the White House was the growing prominence of the so-called alternative media, and especially of talk radio. For years, Republicans had decried the supposed liberal bias of the traditional media elite—the newspapers and television shows. But in the late 1980s and 1990s, as the alternative media grew, Newt Gingrich and other top Republican strategists realized the reach and power of mediums such as C-SPAN and talk radio.

Talk radio originated in the late 1950s, but for most of its infancy it was a rarity on the air. As political scientists Louis Bolce, Gerald De Maio, and Douglas Muzzio write, “In 1960, only two radio stations, KABC in Los Angeles and KMOX in St. Louis, had talk formats. By 1995, 1,130 (one in nine) stations devoted the bulk of their programming to news/talk.” An explosion of talk stations had occurred in the 1980s when new satellite
technology allowed for much cheaper operations. The number of stations devoted to talk quadrupled in the decade.

The growing popularity of talk radio reflected the declining faith in the mainstream media. The down-to-earth nature of the hosts and the participatory nature of the format gave average Americans a chance to voice their views and interact with the news in a way that the Olympian broadcasters on the nightly news could not. Whereas many Americans viewed the mainstream media as elite and aloof, talk radio offered solidarity and reinforcement to those discontented with their government, and reassured them that they were not alone.

House Republicans were the first to realize the vast potential of talk radio. Its appeal was obvious—just like House Republicans were treated like second-class citizens by their Democratic colleagues, the mainstream media scorned talk show hosts as beneath them. Talk radio also offered House Republicans a huge microphone; it was rare during their long stint in the minority for a rank-and-file Republican to get on Meet the Press or Face the Nation, but any congressman could easily call into a talk show and have his views broadcast to millions.

In 1992, when Rep. Tom DeLay (R-TX) took charge of the Republican Study Committee, the RSC began a program called “Talk Right” in which the committee used blast fax technology to send talk show hosts GOP talking points on current issues and offering members of Congress that the hosts could interview live. Although these relationships started slowly, after President Clinton took office in 1993, talk shows became one of the premier platforms in the country for conservatives to voice their dissatisfaction with the Administration, and Newt Gingrich and the other Republican leaders made a concentrated effort to court hosts’ support.
By 1994, the unquestionable king of talk radio was Rush Limbaugh, whose show was broadcast on 659 stations and reached 20 million Americans each week, four million at any given moment. Limbaugh’s meteoric rise was nothing short of incredible. Born in small-town Missouri, Limbaugh tried college, but dropped out after a year to pursue a career in radio. After being fired from stations in Pittsburgh and Kansas City, a desperate Limbaugh took a job selling group tickets for the Kansas City Royals baseball team. He finally got a break in 1984, when a radio executive out of Sacramento was impressed by his style and needed someone to fill the time slot of a recently fired host. This time, he found success, and within four years, Limbaugh had moved to New York and launched his nationally syndicated program.

The key to Limbaugh’s success was his style, a unique blend of satire and commentary. There was an effortless populism to him. He flipped back and forth from football to the deficit, Tom Clancy novels to defense spending, all in a witty yet insightful manner that brought listeners to him and together in a way that other hosts could not match. As reporters Dan Balz and Ron Brownstein write, “On any given show he might denounce the mainstream media, lacerate the latest bit of liberal lunacy, or recast Vice President Al Gore, a frequent nemesis, as the star of a new movie: Forrest Gore, the adventures of ‘a man with a room temperature IQ.’”

Listening to Rush Limbaugh was like an epiphany to many conservatives, who believed especially in 1993 and 1994, when Democrats controlled all branches of government, that there was nowhere to turn. “For the first time, our voters [conservatives] were able to suddenly realize, ‘Hey, I’m not alone out here,’” recalled Bill Paxon. “I can remember the first time I heard Rush Limbaugh. It was an epiphany to finally hear..."
somebody who was giving voice to my concerns. This was people calling in saying, ‘Hey, I’m out here.’ ‘So am I, we’re together.’”

Additionally, the entertainment aspect of talk radio brought many new converts to the conservative cause. Talk show hosts took dull issues that had been floating around for years and repackaged them in a fresh, engaging way. “The truth,” said Wall Street Journal writer John Fund, “is that he [Limbaugh] took ideas that had been current in the conservative movement for decades, popularized them, made them entertaining, and brought an entire non-policy audience” to the conservative movement.

Throughout the 1994 campaign, Gingrich cultivated his relationship with talk radio hosts. He faxed information to Limbaugh and others, which was then read on the air. He was interviewed almost daily on syndicated shows. Most important to Gingrich and other top Republicans, talk radio and other alternative media brought the Republicans’ message to the people unfiltered by the traditional media elite. “Without C-SPAN, without talk radio shows, without all the alternative media, I don’t think we’d have won,” Gingrich told reporters after the November election. “The classic elite media would have distorted our message.”

The message, of course, was embodied in the planks of the Contract with America, which by the summer of 1994, was going through its final permutations. Although the Contract’s content can be truly said to be the product of the members of the House Republican Conference, the responsibility for its language, form, style, and format was given to a team of pollsters and consultants. The final version of the Contract with America appears on the next page.
The first surveys began in mid-July under the direction of the ambitious pollster Frank Luntz, who had worked on the presidential campaigns of Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot in 1992, and the pollsters of the Tarrance Group, a Republican polling firm based in Washington, DC. The first item on their agenda was to test the name of the document, the “Contract” with America. The exact origin of who said Contract when and where is unclear,
but in focus groups and polls, it consistently scored much higher than the other options: platform, pledge, promise, etc. The reasoning behind this was sound. According to a memo that Ed Goeas of the Tarrance Group wrote on August 30, 1994, “The most important concept revealed in the focus groups was accountability. Respondents felt that government and Congress are no long held accountable for their actions.” The idea of a Contract was designed specifically to harness this anger at government, and voters polled reacted positively to this metaphor. As Luntz described in a September 2, 1994 memo, “To say that the electorate is angry would be like saying that the ocean is wet. Voters in general and swing voters in particular have simply ceased to believe that anything good can come out of Washington...The Contract is different...The idea that candidates—in incumbents and challengers alike—would sign on the dotted line is highly appealing to the voters we wish to reach.” To emphasize his point, Luntz bolded and underlined the last sentence.

Crucial to the idea of a Contract was the need for an enforcement clause, a penalty that voters could exact on House Republicans if they did not keep their words. The consultants tested several options, including, in the penultimate version, “Republicans are listening, we’re ready to act,” but eventually chose “If we break this contract, throw us out. We mean it.” The simplicity and directness of the statement scored extremely well in polls and focus groups, and voters indicated that they would accept the Contract if it were made on these terms. In the same September 2 memo, Luntz highlighted the effect of the enforcement clause in bold and underlined text: “While the notion that politicians would actually sign their name to a promise is valuable, what truly sets the Contract apart from past political documents is the ‘If we don’t accomplish what we’ve pledged, throw us out—we mean it’ clause. This graphically demonstrates our seriousness, and it will surely appeal to swing
voters on Election Day.” Emphasizing the accountability theme, the Contract also included check boxes labeled “Done” alongside each item so that voters could keep track of the Contract’s progress. As Gingrich said, “Come January, [people will] be able to tune in to C-SPAN and say, ‘These guys are for real.’”

The focus groups and polls were also targeted toward the wording of the Contract items. From the policy language composed by the working groups of Republican congressmen, a group of consultants distilled the language into two competing versions that were then tested in polls and dial sessions. In each case, Republicans strove to make the Contract sound like what an average American could read and identify with it and therefore used phrases such as, “we hear you loud and clear,” “common-sense reforms,” and consistently started the individual planks with the first person plural “Let’s” or “We.” We were “consciously editing against the New York Times,” Gingrich later recalled. As Luntz remembered:

“Dials told us exactly which trigger words to use. Which words caused an immediate reaction. Accountability. In 1994, you said the word accountability, people paid attention to you. You said common sense, people paid attention to you. You use the word conservative, yeah it’s political, it’s good, but common sense is so much better. Conservative is ideological, common sense is American. The people I was reaching out to wanted things that were American. They didn’t want ideology, they didn’t want partisanship. They wanted action.”

Polling data also determined the order in which the planks were listed. The most popular item, the balanced budget amendment and the line-item veto, was placed at the top followed by items in descending order of importance to swing voters (although all the items were supported by at least 60 percent of the public). The exception to this rule was the last item, congressional term limits, which was in fact the second most popular item, but was
placed at the bottom to bookend the document. “The best stuff was at the top and the bottom,” Luntz recalled. “I discovered that people will read the top of an ad then the bottom of the ad and only then do they decide to go to the middle. They don’t read straight down. So that’s why the balanced budget amendment was the top one and term limits was the bottom one, number one and number two.”

Interestingly, the word Republican is only used twice. At first glance, its absence seems strange from a partisan political document. However, throughout the testing of the proposed Contract with America, the one thing that all participants agreed on was their dislike for the word Republican. As Luntz noted in a memo to the House GOP leadership, “Not a single focus group participant liked the word Republican—not even the registered Republicans! In fact, if the focus group had its way, the word Republican would have been removed from the text in its entirety. Again, any appeal to partisan politics draws an equally strong negative reaction from the very voters we need to win over.” Therefore, the absence of the word Republican was a conscious strategy to ensure that the party portrayed itself as above the partisan struggles by which voters had become disillusioned.

The final version of the Contract was published in the October 22, 1994 edition of *TV Guide* magazine. Although *TV Guide* had never before been used for a national political advertisement, Gingrich and other Republican leaders were attracted by its large circulation, and they speculated that an advertisement there would likely be seen by each member of the household several times over the course of the week. The ad was printed on card-stock so that it would be easy to find and tear out. “Why *TV Guide*? It was the only magazine where people would see it seven times over a week-long period. Every time you open it up, you’d find the Contract,” said Luntz.
The Republican National Committee, reenergized and well-funded after two years of Haley Barbour’s reconstructive efforts, paid for the $1.6 million cost of the advertisement. Barbour had agreed to commit RNC funds after a meeting with Gingrich in late February in which Gingrich told Barbour of his plans to nationalize the election through the Contract. Intrigued by the idea, Barbour pledged heavy financial support, and promised to enlist outsider pollsters and consultants to help Gingrich. In fact, Barbour became a trusted player within the House Republican Leadership and assisted Gingrich, Armey, and company with the political side of their election strategy.

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On September 27, 367 House Republican incumbents and challengers gathered on the West Front of the U.S. Capitol to publicly sign the Contract with America. It was a made-for-TV event, complete with flags waving, a band playing, cameras rolling, and enthusiastic Republican leaders proclaiming that this was the first step toward a better future for America.

For over a decade, since the Capitol Steps event of 1980, Gingrich had dreamed of this moment. Indeed, the event could not have gone better. Hundreds of candidates were in attendance, the network news shows were planning a special feature, and the choreographed speeches went off without a hitch. Even the weather had cooperated; after a night of rain, the day dawned sunny without a cloud in the sky. In fact, September 27 had been a date picked by Gingrich nearly a year prior. “About a year before, I remember one day Newt said, ‘We need to announce this and I think September 27 is a good time for it. It’s close enough to the election but far enough from it that we can grab the message. I’ve talked to my long range weather forecaster, and he assures me that it’s going to be a beautiful day,’” remembered Kerry Knott.

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The Contract was a revolutionary document, not only because it directly took on Tip O’Neill’s accepted maxim that “all politics is local,” but also because it dramatically shaped the national debate in the weeks leading up to Election Day. Republican candidates—incumbents and challengers alike—took the Contract very seriously. Many of them ran their campaigns on it and included it in advertisements, mailings, and speeches. For example, in Nebraska’s Second District, the Republican challenger Jon Christensen featured the Contract in his district. “The Contract became part of our daily activities. I started talking about the Contract with America and the ten things we’re going to do in the first 100 days. We told the voters, ‘If you elect me, this is what we’re going to do.’”

For many candidates, including Christensen, the Contract was not their entire message, but rather provided them with a framework within which they tailored their message to their districts. In Erie, Pennsylvania’s 21st District, Republican nominee Phil English was running for an open seat in a blue-collar, Democratic-leaning district, and thus had to tailor his message to appeal to the electorate: “We found it very advantageous while signing on to the Contract with America, to emphasize at the same time we have a slightly different position on welfare reform, a slightly different position on health care reform. In effect, we used the Contract with America as a framework and a series of themes while we were also able to insert some of our own details.”

The thing that most impressed many Republicans was the fact that the candidates were willing to sign their names on the dotted line and commit themselves to an ambitious policy agenda before they were even elected to a majority. “The Contract with America was nothing new,” recalled Republican J.C. Watts, who was running for an open seat in
Oklahoma, “but it was a savvy idea by the leadership, who were willing to put their fate on the line, rather than just criticize the Democrats.”\footnote{286}

Almost immediately after the Contract was unveiled, Democrats began attacking the Contract, labeling it a “Contract on America” rather than a Contract with America. Their main criticism of the Contract was that it seemed to be missing its price tag and would result in huge budget deficits (especially as a result of its planks to cut taxes and raise defense spending). According to them, the Contract was a return to the politics of Reagan, whose supply-side economic policies had doubled the national debt in the 1980s. “If you like Ronald Reagan’s supply-side economics, you will love this riverboat gamble,” said Rep. Robert E. Wise Jr. (D-WV).\footnote{287} This was an argument that Republicans gladly engaged since the former president continued to hold high popularity ratings among the public. “I’d welcome a contest between Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan. It’s ‘reinvent government’ against ‘re-limit government,’” said GOP activist William Kristol, noting the two presidents’ buzzwords.\footnote{288} Even President Clinton came out publicly against the Contract, saying Republicans were “trying to abolish arithmetic.”\footnote{289}

Initially, many Democrats believed that the Contract was a huge boon to their electoral chances. Up until its unveiling, the campaign had centered around the unpopularity of Bill Clinton, a charge that Democrats could do little to refute. However, after the Contract was signed, Democrats now had specific policy proposals to which they could tie their Republican challengers. Rep. Vic Fazio (D-CA), chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee remarked, “We’re able to go back on the offensive in district after district...Our Democratic candidates will be asking them to explain this and calling them to account.”\footnote{290} Stan Greenburg, Clinton’s pollster, argued, “The Republicans had positioned
themselves rather nicely by being an angry voice out there…They made the mistake of
giving that voice some content that people don’t want to be reminded of.”

By suggesting that Republicans would have to make cuts in Social Security and Medicare in order to fulfill
their promises of tax cuts and increased defense spending, Democrats went on the offensive
in a way that was impossible beforehand. “There is not a night that I don’t thank God for the
Contract,” said Paul Begala, a Democratic consultant and political adviser to President
Clinton. “It is the greatest gift to the Democratic Party since Medicare.”

Many Republicans were also critical of the plan for the same reasons. They believed
that the Contract was unnecessary at best and damaging at worst. If the party was going to
pick up seats merely by opposing Clinton, why open up to Democratic attacks on specific
policy proposals? “If I were a Democrat in a closely contested district, I’d be in church right
now giving thanks,” said Rep. Fred Grandy (R-IA), who was not running for reelection to the
House in 1994. “The one thing we’ve nailed Clinton on has been his propensity to
overpromise and to underdeliver, and here we are doing the same damn thing.”

By many accounts, the first ten days after the unveiling of the Contract were, in the
words of one party official, “terrible.” For the first time in months, Democrats had
something to attack, and they seized the offensive with a fury. Republican candidates
flooded the RNC and NRCC with telephone calls seeking advice on how to beat back
Democratic attacks, complaining that they were feeling the heat for the first time in months.
In the words of RNC official Barry Jackson, the candidates “all got home and the missiles
just kept coming.”

The initial days were so tough for some candidates that some Republican consultants counseled them to drop the Contract and go back to an all-negative
anti-Clinton strategy. “Clinton and Congress—out of step and out of touch” was one of the messages proposed. 295

Nevertheless, Gingrich, Armey, and the rest of the Republican candidates who signed the Contract believed in its underlying message: that Republicans were willing to be accountable for their promises and give the American people ten bills that would, in their opinion, improve the country. On television, on the radio, to their voters, and in their literature, the candidates talked about the Contract. They knew that the Contract was merely giving the American people what they wanted.

The Contract’s impact, ironically, was enhanced by the reaction it received from Democrats. In a way very similar to the publicity Tip O’Neill brought Gingrich and Bob Walker during the Camscam debacle in 1980s, the massive attack that Democrats waged on the Contract brought it a level of publicity that Gingrich could only have dreamed of. Especially important was the attention from President Clinton himself. As Gingrich later recalled, “The Friday before the [September 27] event, Tony Blankley, my press secretary, received a surprise phone call from a White House reporter. The president was about to launch a full-scale attack on the Contract. What was our reaction? Frankly, we were overjoyed. The White House response ensured the Contract would be the subject of the weekend talk shows. Coverage was certain to skyrocket. The White House counterattack had turned a potential inside-page photo opportunity into the centerpiece of the campaign.” 296 Gingrich was right; the day after the Contract’s unveiling, the New York Times published a story on page 16; after Clinton and the Democrats had attacked it, the Contract became front page news.
Even more crucial was television coverage. As Blankley remembered, “One of the top producers for NBC Nightly News told me the day we had the Contract story it would be nothing more than a short anchor-read story accompanied by a flash of video showing all the Republicans on the Capitol steps. Then the White House attacked and we became a real story.”

As the Contract made waves in districts around the country, Republicans in the House and Senate continued to deny President Clinton and congressional Democrats the victories they needed to campaign on. Their strategy was simple: just say no.

Despite the best efforts of Gingrich, Armey, and the rest of the Republican leadership, the majoritarian nature of the House, especially with Democrats increasingly relying on closed rules to limit amendments and debate, denied the Republicans the opportunity to stifle the Administration’s agenda in the House. However, Gingrich found an unlikely partner in Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole, a man with whom Gingrich had never really had a productive relationship.

Taking advantage of the Senate’s rules providing for unlimited debate, Dole and his Republican colleagues employed a tactic known as the filibuster to kill most of President Clinton’s legislative agenda. The filibuster—essentially talking a bill to death—has its roots in the 19th century, but was not significantly used until after the Civil Rights debates of the 1960s. The tactic was used over ninety times by the Democratic Senate minority in the 1980s, but truly came into widespread use during the first two years of Clinton’s presidency. In contrast to the 16 times the filibuster was used in the entire 19th century, during the 103rd Congress, Dole and his colleagues employed the tactic over sixty times. Among the bills blocked were Clinton’s health care plan, a labor law reform bill favored by organized labor,
and Clinton’s 1993 stimulus package. This led the Washington Post to comment, “The filibuster threat has hindered Clinton like no previous U.S. president because Bob Dole has expanded its use with impunity.”

Many legislators in Congress were happy to go home without having acted on much of the Administration’s legislative agenda, even some Democrats in close races. “What was striking about the end of the 103rd Congress was the large number of members who were happy to go home empty handed,” said American Enterprise Institute congressional expert Norman Ornstein. When Dole and other Senate Republicans were criticized for their obstructionist tactics, Dole, characteristically, fired back, “We make no apologies for parking in the middle of the political intersection if we have to park there to protect the American taxpayers from bad legislation.” Senator Phil Gramm, who was chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee (the NRCC’s counterpart in the Senate), was more succinct, “No is the right answer when the question is more taxes, more spending, more government, more business as usual.”

By denying the president and incumbent Democrats victories on their central issues, the Republicans accomplished several goals. First, they were able to portray Democrats in general and Clinton in particular as politicians that could not come through on their own promises. This reinforced the accountability message that the GOP strove to drive home with the Contract with America. Only Republicans, they claimed, could be counted on to deliver. Second, by dragging the Administrations initiatives along for months at a time, Republicans were able to drive wedges within Democratic ranks and create the public perception that the Democrats were a chaotic and disorganized majority. For all the efforts made by Clinton to disassociate himself from the comparisons to Jimmy Carter, these public
perceptions only served to bolster them. Finally, the lack of a positive Democratic agenda to run on left the party with only one viable campaign option: attack the Republican Contract, which played right into the Republicans’ hands. After all, as Dick Armey later recalled, “everything in the Contract had the approval of the American people. The whole idea implied prior agreement. You don’t ‘contract’ something with people that they don’t want.”301

The trouble signs for the Democrats had been brewing for months before Election Day. Primary results all over the country put Democrats in a state of near panic. In the Oklahoma primary on September 20, eight-term Democratic incumbent Mike Synar lost his primary to a 71-year old schoolteacher with no prior political experience. Even more worrisome was that Synar outspent his opponent by a twenty-to-one margin. In Washington State, House Speaker Tom Foley had a surprisingly poor showing in his primary. This led Rep. Bill Richardson (D-NM) to remark, “Well, there’s near panic out there. Great commotion, great concern that some of the stalwarts of the party are in trouble.”302

As they had done in previous congressional elections, the Democrats took the traditional approach to winning their majority: fighting district-by-district and taking advantage of the power of incumbency. “We were running the campaign in the traditional manner, really. We were running it in a way that was building on incumbency and using the power of incumbency to protect as many of our members as we could,” recalled Rep. Vic Fazio (D-CA), the chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.303 Nevertheless, Democrats were also at a disadvantage using this strategy because many of their members were retiring. “We had some members, however, that were retiring in districts
that were becoming increasingly Republican and we had a frankly reduced chance for pickups in that environment [as a result of Clinton’s unpopularity],” said Fazio.\textsuperscript{304}

By September, the president’s popularity was so low that many Democrats feared him coming to their district. Rep. Don Johnson (D-GA) told the press that he didn’t want Clinton to campaign in his district unless he endorsed his opponent.\textsuperscript{305} Nevertheless, Clinton was quite active on the campaign trail during September and the early part of October, attacking the Republican Contract with America, telling a crowd in Rhode Island, for example, that the Republican promises will result in a 20 percent cut in Social Security and Medicare, and a crowd in Michigan that the Republicans were trying to drive down turnout: “They want to drive down voter turnout, diminish confidence in the political process and give the election to the extremist element in their own party. That’s their whole goal.”\textsuperscript{306} As a part of a $2 million advertising campaign in October, the Democratic National Committee unveiled an ad in which they charged that the Contract made $1 trillion in promises: “A trillion dollars in promises,” an announcer in the advertisements declared. “How will they make up the spending gap? Explode the deficit again? Make devastating cuts in Medicare?”\textsuperscript{307}

The attacks against the Contract using Social Security and Medicare, however, would soon begin to sound hollow. On October 23, 1994, the Washington Post broke a front-page story about a secret memo written by White House Office of Management and Budget director Alice Rivlin on October 3 outlining several hard choices President Clinton would have to make over the next two years of his presidency if the president wanted to fulfill his goals of increasing spending in areas like technology and job-training, of providing universal health insurance, of reducing the deficit, and perhaps even of allowing a tax cut for middle-class working families. “There are only three possibilities,” her memorandum asserted, “all
of them tough.” The possibilities are to raise taxes, cut spending for specific Government programs or reduce entitlements.\(^{308}\)

Although Clinton publicly stated that the memo was merely cataloguing possibilities that could arise in the future, it was immediately attacked by Republicans, especially in relation to its seemingly hypocritical nature. “What is cravenly hypocritical,” said GOP strategist William Kristol, is that at the same time Democrats are “publicly and falsely accusing Republicans of plotting a similar assault on entitlements” they are discussing doing the same.\(^{309}\) “This administration has given hypocrisy a new name. While they’re out blasting Republicans with phony pre-election rhetoric, they’re considering a big menu of tax increases on top of the world’s largest tax increase ever [referring to the 1993 budget],” charged Bob Dole. “The American people have heard enough election-year double talk from this administration.”\(^{310}\)

In the wake of the Rivlin memo, made public just two weeks before Election Day, the Republicans started to pull away significantly. By the latter part of October, Republicans took a 47 percent to 44 percent advantage over the Democrats in the generic Congress vote (i.e. Will you vote for the Democrat or the Republican for Congress in the coming election?), the first time since 1953 that the Democrats had not enjoyed an advantage in this poll. In late October, President Clinton seemed to be only too glad to leave the country for a trip to the Middle East to oversee the signing of a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan. The foreign policy successes steadily improved his approval ratings, which were back over 50 percent by October 31, the day he returned to the United States. Clinton wanted to go back on the campaign trail to help his fellow Democrats, despite the advice of his pollster, Dick Morris, who told him to stay off the campaign trail so that he remained “presidential:” “Go back to
the Middle East. Don’t campaign for anyone; it will lower your approval ratings, and you will drag everyone down to defeat.” Clinton ignored the advice, and went back to campaigning. Within a few days, his approval ratings were down again. Although Clinton had hoped that his presence on the campaign trail would energize Democrats, it in fact did the opposite, sending “one last jolt of electricity through the entire conservative coalition.” Republicans decided to make the last week a relentless barrage of anti-Clinton messaging, once again reinforcing the nationalization theme of Clinton or not Clinton. “If he had stayed in the Middle East,” RNC operative Don Fierce said, “I don’t know how we would have closed.”

By the last week of the campaign, most political observers agreed that the Senate would go to the Republicans, but that the GOP was unlikely to reach the forty seat gain they needed for control of the House. ABC News predicted a Republican gain of about thirty seats, although they did acknowledge that forty was possible. Out of the seventy races too close to call around the country, fifty-three of those seats were held by Democrats.

Up until the last days before the election, Democratic leaders still contended that the election depended on local matters, even while attacking the Contract with America. Tony Coelho, the former congressman and at the time a Clinton political advisor, said, “We don’t think these are going to be national elections, we think that basically they’re going to be local--state by state, district by district, governor by governor.” Nevertheless, the main Democratic attacks continued to target the Contract with America, bringing more and more publicity to the document. In the final days of the campaign, the Contract was everywhere, on both the Democratic and Republican sides.
Finally, on Election Day, the Republican landslide came. The results were astounding. The Republicans picked up fifty-four seats in the House of Representatives to give them a 230-204 majority, their first in four decades. In the Senate, the GOP captured eight seats on Election Day and immediate added another when Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama switched parties to the Republicans, giving the GOP a 53-47 Senate majority, their first since 1986. These results were mirrored in the states. The Republicans won twelve governorships to give them their first majority of statehouses since 1972 and twenty state legislatures switched party control, the first time in fifty years that the GOP controlled a majority of legislatures.

In a year that was notable for its ferocious anti-government mood, even more striking was the fact that not a single Republican incumbent that was seeking reelection in the House, Senate, or as governor was defeated. On the other hand, thirty-four incumbent House Democrats were defeated, the highest number and percentage loss for a majority party since 1948. Among the defeated Democrats were House Speaker Tom Foley, the first speaker to be defeated since 1862 and only the second in history; Jack Brooks, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee and a member of Congress for forty-two years; and Dan Rostenkowski, the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee and a member of Congress for thirty-six years.

The vote share totals were equally as astonishing. 70 million voters went to the polls in 1994, 9 million more (15 percent more) than had voted in the last midterm in 1990. This constituted the second largest jump in history. Before 1994, the Republicans had never exceeded 28 million votes, but in that election received 36.6 million for a 31 percent increase over their previous high. Democrats received 1 million fewer votes than they did in 1990.
Although some have attributed this shift to an electorate turning its back on the in-party, “if that were the case, disgruntled voters could have stayed home—as they did in the Watergate election of 1974, when the GOP vote dropped by more than 3 million from its 1970 level while the Democratic vote rose by less than 1 million.” To political scientists John Pitney and William Connelly, this meant that “in 1994, people voted for Republicans, not just against Democrats.”

The sweeping results also showed this landslide to be truly national. In 1992, House Democrats had received more votes than the GOP in every region of the country. In 1994, House Democrats lost every region except the Northeast. In fact, the only state in which the Democrats netted a House pickup was Rhode Island.

Most important, of course, the Republican landslide in 1994 brought the Republicans out of the minority for the first time in forty years, a result that almost everyone in the political community thought was impossible. Republicans had solved what Newt Gingrich had called “the hardest problem in American politics,” although he acknowledged that 80 percent of the solution lay beyond Republican control. This is not to say, however, that the Republicans were “Forrest Gumps, passive beneficiaries of destiny. Instead, they carried out shrewd strategic and tactical decisions, which paid off in November.”

Gingrich’s grand strategy to nationalize the election had finally paid off.

On the day after the election, as Gingrich, Armey, Walker, DeLay, and others emerged from Newt’s office in the Capitol to begin planning the transition, the press swarmed them, eagerly asking what Republicans planned to do now that they had won the majority. As Gingrich later recalled, “‘Implement the Contract,’ I said…‘Look, the election is over,’ they said. ‘Can you tell us what you are really going to do now that you’ve won
your victory?’ Each time I would pull out my copy of the Contract. ‘Read this,’ I told them.”

Over the next few months, Gingrich and the new Republican majority would use the Contract as a governing tool to focus the new Republican majority.

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The 1994 election was certainly a landslide victory, but several important questions remain. The first is one of process: what was the real effect of the Contract with America? Its critics, and there are many on both the Democratic and Republican sides, point to poll numbers taken immediately before and after the election that cast doubt on its significance. The New York Times/CBS News poll of October 29-November 1, 1994 found that 71 percent of respondents had never heard of the Contract and another 15 percent said it would make no difference in how they voted.

Many Democrats shared the opinion of DCCC Chairman Vic Fazio, who called the Contract “process stuff that sounded good.” “I think the Democrats lost the majority more than the Republicans won it,” Fazio recalled. “I think Newt Gingrich would like you to believe that the Contract was decisive, but the Contract was really an afterthought. It was late in the election cycle, not a lot of exposure was given to it by the free media, and there was not a lot of money to buy paid advertisements...It did not have nearly the impact that other factors did.”

Even some Republicans, like newly-elected freshman David Funderburk of North Carolina, did not believe the Contract played much of a role: “Nobody in my district had heard of it, and it was not a major factor.”

“The Contract was something that got candidates excited, but it wasn’t the reason the Republicans got elected,” said Scott Bensing.
Nevertheless, although the Contract itself was perhaps not the decisive factor of the election, it played a pivotal role in providing a positive platform for Republicans candidates to complement the attacks on Clinton and the Democrats. “People did not vote for Gil Gutknecht because of the Contract,” newly-elected Republican freshman Gil Gutknecht of Minnesota recalled, “but the Contract moved Republicans off the image of Nyet, Nyet, Nyet…The Contract gave the Republicans a positive attitude and a positive agenda.”323 “I think it was one of many reasons,” said Kerry Knott. “You also had the unpopularity of Clinton, you had the rise of the Perot vote that was really looking for reform. Like Newt’s original vision. The combination of going negative on Clinton and a positive agenda both worked together to win us a majority.”324 Frank Luntz, the Republican pollster, had a similar take on the Contract’s impact:

“The Contract with America kept Republicans positive at a time when they would otherwise have gone negative because they were attacking incumbents. What happened was that it gave them a reason to run a different style campaign, and for six weeks instead of telling Americans what they were against, they told Americans what they were for. They all built up a level of credibility so when they turned around and started to attack the Democrats, as challengers always do, they had credibility. They had a basis to attack and to say I’m not just against A, I do support B.”325

To Bob Walker, it was this positive agenda that provided the decisive votes, namely the 9 million new people who showed up to the polls on Election Day: “I think the 9 million people who showed up at the polls who had never been there before were at least largely influenced by a message that had a positive theme to it. The Democrats got out almost exactly the same number of people that they’d gotten in the previous off-year election, but what really made the difference was this whole group and their enthusiasm.”326
Proponents of the Contract downplay the seemingly negative poll numbers and rather emphasize the aggregate impact of the message embodied by the Contract. According to this argument, although voters may have not known the Contract as such, they understood the message and they associated the message with the Republican Party. The fact that nearly all Republican House candidates were saying the same thing all over the country reinforced this image of a party that stood for certain issues. “The fact was that the Republican candidates in 1994 were all speaking the Gingrich mantra of tax cuts, a balanced budget, and a stronger military,” said historian Steven Gillon.327

The Contract also provided a lightning rod for party activists to rally around. As Walker remembered, “I believe that we generated enthusiasm for the Republican ticket because we had this well focused message. So whether people knew about it as the Contract or whatever, the activists knew about it and the activists were able to drive people out.”328 Key to the motivation behind the activists was the vocal support for the Contract provided by talk radio hosts around the country. Talk radio was instrumental in reaching the party faithful quickly and effectively.

Furthermore, Republicans in 1994 were able to recruit exceptional candidates to challenge Democratic incumbents around the country. More about this subject will come in the next chapter, but suffice it to say here that better candidates with a consistent message were a recipe for success for the GOP. But even for the second-tier candidates, the Contract provided a strategy that would keep them on-message and on the rise. As Kerry Knott later recalled:

“One of the things was excellent candidate recruitment, which Bill Paxon and Newt had done. Their idea was that we needed to get a candidate in every single district. We really set out to create a wave, because if you are able to
do it then you get to beat some people that you don’t expect to beat. But if you don’t have a candidate running, then you can’t win. So we had a candidate running everywhere. A lot of those candidates, and even a lot of the ones that would be considered first-tier candidates, generally adopted the Contract as their message. So we didn’t do a lot of national advertising, but I would say it was fairly universal as far as candidates who decided to talk about the Contract on the campaign trail and to drive it through their campaign literature. And it gave a lot of those second-tier candidates something to talk about. They couldn’t afford high-priced consultants or slick TV time, but it gave them a coherent vision to talk about and get people excited about. What I’ve told people when they say that the Contract wasn’t particularly impactful, I say, think of how the election would have gone without the Contract. I think we would have come close, but we would have not gotten there. Because a lot of these members who were swept in wouldn’t have had a prayer. They would have been out there getting attacked and fighting back on who knows what issues. But we gave them a tool to win.”

Almost undoubtedly, the decisive factor in the election was the fact that the Republicans were able to successfully nationalize it. Essentially, the House Republicans were able to convince the electorate to apply the standards most often used in presidential contests (where Republicans had won five of the last seven) to congressional elections. “All politics was not local in 1994,” said political scientist Gary Jacobson. “Republicans succeeded in framing the local choice in national terms, making taxes, social discipline, big government, and the Clinton presidency the dominant issues.” The Contract was the vehicle through which nationalization was achieved. “In Congress you had traditionally been able to win by saying: ‘Here’s what I’ve done for the district,’” said Rep. Jon Fox (R-PA). “With the Contract one party was able to say: ‘Here’s what we want to do for the country.’”

Crucial to their success was the disapproval with President Clinton. Clinton and his policies provided the symbols that Republicans rallied against. In Republicans’ eyes, his health care reform bill represented the march of big government. His 1993 budget and tax
increase represented the Democrats’ willingness to raise taxes. The crime bill and assault weapons ban represented the threat they posed to gun owners. His attempt to change the policy on gays in the military represented the threat posed to cultural traditionalism. The Contract fit into this scheme by turning the election into a choice between the Republican agenda and the failures of the Clinton Administration. According to Clinton aide Doug Sosnik, “The Contract gave a symbolic and substantive vehicle for the Republicans to make this a change-versus-status-quo election.”

Much later, Clinton accepted partial blame for the Republican victory: “I had contributed to the demise by allowing my first weeks to be defined by gays in the military; by falling to concentrate on the campaign until it was too late; and by trying to do too much too fast in a news climate in which my victories were minimized, my losses were magnified, and the overall impression was created that I was just another pro-tax, big-government liberal, not the New Democrat who had won the presidency.”

For all the advantages that Clinton gave the Republicans, the flip side could as easily be applied to Democrats in Congress. Often the president’s unpopularity was a weight around Democrats’ necks. But even more fundamental was the need for Democrats to support the president in the two years prior to the 1994 election. According to Rep. Vic Fazio (D-CA), after the 1992 election, “Democrats suddenly had a majority that needed to be operationally supportive of their president. The Democratic majority had observed in the Carter Administration that when they were at odds with each other, they all suffered. I think [Speaker] Tom Foley wanted to be as supportive of the president as he could, and therefore Foley went along with White House requests.” In many cases, this meant acceding to
Administration desires over what would have been best in the long run for keeping a Democratic House. Fazio recalled:

“The Democrats made several mistakes. The first was to fail to pass the health care proposal. The fact that they couldn’t even get it out of committee to vote on passing it at all really frustrated the Democratic base and suppressed their turnout. The Democrats in Congress made a mistake by adopting the Clinton plan in full. Rather than going to the Administration and saying we can’t pass this, but we can pass that, they didn’t. Second, rather than separating gun issues from the crime bill, we allowed the crime bill to become a target for the NRA and the Democrats who supported it were targeted for defeat. Thirdly, to the credit I think to the Democrats, they passed a credible plan to reduce the deficit, which over time worked. But at the point of the election in 1994, there was really no evidence of that. All it was was a tough vote on the House floor that, as I can remember, only raised taxes on all Americans in the form of a gas tax of 3.4 cents. At the time, Republicans seized on that and said that this was a tax increase on all Americans.”

With something as large and complicated as a congressional election, it is impossible to identify a single overriding reason to explain its results. As much as some partisans would like to completely rely on or discount the Contract with America, it is clear that the Contract, as a tool of the successful strategy of nationalization of the election, played an important, but limited role in bringing the Republican Party out of the desert after forty years. Without the decisions of Clinton and the congressional Democrats mentioned by Fazio and others, the climate would have never existed for Republicans to win such sweeping gains in one election. On the other hand, without the Republicans’ visionary strategy to recognize the opportunity and the guts to try something completely new, a majority would have never been accomplished. This combination was noted by President Clinton: “Gingrich had proved to be a better politician than I was. He understood that he could nationalize a midterm election with the contract, with incessant attacks on the Democrats, and with the argument that all the
conflicts and bitter partisanship in Washington the Republicans had generated must be the Democrats’ fault since we controlled both Congress and the White House.”

Indeed, the 1994 election was exceptional merely on the basis of its results. In their long tenure in the minority, Republicans had gained seats in individual elections. Yet as their numbers waxed and waned, they never approached the 218 seats necessary for a majority. In fact, between 1956 and 1994, the Republicans’ high water point was only 192, reached three times in the elections of 1968, 1972, and 1980 on the coattails of three Republican presidential wins. Whereas the longest tenure of any previous minority was a scant sixteen years, four decades passed without seeing a Republican majority. Yet in 1994, not only did the Republicans gain the forty seats necessary to achieve a majority (their fifty-four seat gain was the largest since the Democrats won seventy-five in 1948), but they did it in such convincing fashion as to guarantee a place in history. No Republican incumbent was defeated while thirty-four House incumbent Democrats lost their seats, including the speaker of the House and two powerful committee chairmen. State legislatures changed party control to the Republicans, the GOP controlled more than half of the governorships, and the GOP increased its vote share by a whopping 31 percent. Their strategy of nationalizing the election is now a hallmark of political campaigns, augmenting Tip O’Neill’s maxim that “all politics is local” with the Gingrich corollary, “except when they’re national.”

The effects of the election results, however, would not be fully experienced until the Republicans took formal control of the House in January 1995. For the House Republicans, winning the majority was just the first step in their Revolution.
CHAPTER 4: ATTEMPTING A REVOLUTION

As far as opening days go, the first day of the 104th Congress began quite ordinarily with an ecumenical prayer service at St. Peter’s Catholic Church on Capitol Hill. Democrats and Republicans packed the church, joining together in the biennial tradition of opening a new Congress with the tones of bipartisanship. Yet as members of Congress entered and exited the sanctuary, murmuring brief greetings to one another, it was clear that January 4, 1995 was no typical day, but rather one that crackled with all the anticipation of an inauguration. However, it was not a president that was to take the oath of office at 12:00 noon, but the first Republican-controlled House of Representatives in four decades.

Since the landslide Republican victory in November, Capitol Hill had seen a nonstop flurry of activity. Moving vans had taken the place of taxicabs as the dominant motor vehicle as defeated members cleared their offices and new members took their places. As is the norm when majorities switch, the Republicans were moving into the more choice office space and the Democrats retreating to minority quarters, which added to the chaos that already reigned in the three House office buildings along Independence Avenue on the south side of the Capitol.

November and December had been months of wildly conflicting emotions in the halls of Cannon, Longworth, and Rayburn. Democrats, stunned by their electoral trouncing and uncertain about their futures, quietly but emotionally packed up their offices and left town. “Watching the Democrats move out of their offices,” Republican pollster Frank Luntz said, “was quite an experience. I’d never seen staffers, I’d never seen adults, cry before. I saw
just floor after floor of tears.” Their successors—the Republican freshmen—were jubilant. Freshman orientation had commenced December 1 at the Heritage Foundation, the venerable king of Republican think-tanks in Washington. Although the New York Times described these members as “73 Mr. Smiths,” a not entirely flattering portrayal, their energy and drive was palpable as members, their families, and visitors flooded into the Capitol on opening day.

By 10:30 a.m., the House galleries were packed with onlookers, and an overflow room was set up for VIPs in Statuary Hall, which, incidentally, was where the House of Representatives met until 1857. In the House chamber, the excitement and anticipation in the air was palpable. For weeks, admittance to the galleries had been the hottest ticket in town. The floor looked more like a gala than a legislative chamber. Members and their families milled about, greeting their Republican colleagues with congratulations and their Democratic ones with consolations. Many members had brought their children to the Capitol with them; of special interest to the kids were the Mighty Morphin’ Power Rangers who were going to be performing in the Longworth cafeteria after lunch.

All the major news media had moved to Washington to cover the events of the day. As news crews set up on the Capitol grounds, the new Republican majority had not forgotten those who had helped them get elected—the talk radio hosts who had, until then, been barred from broadcasting in the Capitol. The hosts lauded the day as a return to normalcy. “God bless America,” Cincinnati host Bill Cunningham exclaimed, “the normal people are back in charge.” The traditional news media was unsurprisingly more reserved in their coverage, but no less aware of the day’s significance. “When the bronze-framed clocks that loom over the House chamber strike noon Wednesday, a clerk will gavel lawmakers to order, and the chaplain will say a prayer. Across the Capitol, the Senate will observe a similar ritual of
simple dignity, marking the two-century continuum of American democracy,” reported the New York Times. “Then comes the revolution.”

The other end of Pennsylvania Avenue was by and large subdued that morning. The president was on vacation in Arkansas, choosing to spend the first few days of 1995 duck hunting near his mother-in-law’s home. He was due to return to Washington that afternoon. Nevertheless, the president’s absence was barely noted by the Washington establishment and indeed by most of the country. Instead, all eyes were on the new Republican Congress and its enigmatic new speaker, Rep. Newt Gingrich of Georgia. Ever since the sweeping Republican victory in the November midterm elections, no one, not even the president, had commanded more attention and scrutiny.

Back inside the House chamber, the scene on the floor was notable as much for the many new faces as for the absence of some familiar ones. Eighty-four new members—seventy-three Republicans and eleven Democrats—were to be sworn in for the first time. The freshmen were easily recognizable on the floor, their faces marked with exuberance and euphoria. Gone, however, were some people that had seemed to transcend the beginnings and endings of many previous congresses, institutions themselves within the institution of the House. Jack Brooks, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, gone after forty-two years; Dan Rostenkowski, the chairman of Ways and Means, gone after thirty-six; and the biggest defeat of them all, House Speaker Tom Foley, gone after thirty years, the first speaker defeated for reelection since the Civil War.

Adding to the strangeness of the morning, several senators, usually disdainful of the lower house, were seen in the House chamber, eager to watch history being made. The Senate, unlike the House designed by the Founding Fathers to be a continuous institution
with no discrete beginnings and endings, recessed around 11:30 a.m. so that senators could have the opportunity to watch the proceedings in the House of Representatives, and several, including Majority Leader Robert Dole (R-KS) and Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA), took advantage.

At 12:00 noon, the formal opening got underway as the outgoing clerk of the House gavel the chamber to order. Following the traditional prayer by the House chaplain and the roll call of the states, the balloting for speaker began at 12:42 p.m. One by one, the clerk called the roll as the representatives cast their ballots in the traditional party-line vote, with Gingrich garnering 228 votes to Richard Gephardt’s (D-MO) 202. Although the outcome of the balloting had been preordained, the election itself had not been without its light moments. After the first two ballots had been cast by Reps. Neil Abercrombie and Gary Ackerman, both Democrats, Ackerman shouted, “Move to close the roll” with the vote total standing at two for Gephardt and none for Gingrich. The chamber erupted in laughter.339

When the balloting was closed, the Republicans in the chamber let loose, and a chant of “Newt! Newt! Newt!” gained momentum as the new speaker entered the chamber escorted, as per tradition, by Gephardt and the other members of the Georgia delegation. As Gingrich mounted the speaker’s rostrum, a member called out, “It’s a whole Newt world!” and an enormous wave of applause spilled across the chamber.

When the chamber quieted down, Gephardt, the new minority leader, began to introduce Gingrich, deadpanning, “This is not a moment I have been waiting for,” before handing the gavel of the House to Gingrich.340 Most eloquently, Gephardt summed up the significance and poignancy of the day: “With resignation but with resolve,” he said, “I hereby end forty years of Democratic rule of this House.”341
The next day, *Washington Post* reporter Dan Balz wrote, “For four decades, Democrats had patrolled the corridors of Congress with a sense of permanence that seemed impregnable. Yesterday, the Berlin Wall of American politics came tumbling down.”

The day was filled with ironies and symbols of the new order. Upon his election, Gingrich was introduced by the House doorkeeper, whose position was soon to be abolished. Gingrich was sworn in by the dean of the House—its longest serving member—John Dingell (D-MI), whose father—who had held the same House seat that his son now did—Gingrich lauded in his opening speech as an emblem of New Deal liberalism, exactly what Gingrich and the other Republicans were about to set out to dismantle. Even Gingrich’s acknowledgement of former Republican House Leaders John J. Rhodes of Arizona and Robert H. Michel of Illinois somehow seemed paradoxical. After all, it was their brand of traditional conciliatory Republicanism that Gingrich had set out to destroy during his decade-long ascent to power.

For all the symbolism of the day, it was hard to ignore the singular achievement of Newt Gingrich, someone who had gone from being a backbench gadfly to the most powerful speaker since Uncle Joe Cannon, who had served from 1903-1911. Since the founding of the Conservative Opportunity Society in 1983, Gingrich and his allies reshaped the party from the inside out. “There are two ways to rise,” Gingrich once said. “One is to figure out the current system and figure out how you fit into it. The other is to figure out the system that ought to be, and as you change the current system into the system that ought to be, at some point it becomes more practical for you to be a leader than for somebody who grew out of the old order.” Gingrich had indeed followed his own advice.
Yet for all the ceremonial significance of the first few hours of the 104th Congress, it was above all clear to the new Republican majority that they had a job to do, namely to implement their pact with the American electorate: the Contract with America. For the next 100 days, the GOP would attempt to revolutionize the House and the nation.

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Understandably, the reaction to the results of the November election were mixed, with Democrats shocked, stunned, and distraught and Republicans shocked, stunned, and euphoric. The media struggled to find a large enough metaphor to describe the Republican landslide. “The United States was swept yesterday by the equivalent of a bloodless revolution,” said ABC’s Ted Koppel.344 “The Republican Revolution of Election ‘94 shook Capitol Hill like an earthquake today. Its reverberations went into statehouses and moved the whole political landscape sharply to the right,” reported Dan Rather of CBS.345 His colleague Bob Schieffer remarked, “For Democrats it was a nightmare come true as dawn broke on a different Capitol, a Republican Capitol.”346 And ABC’s Chris Bury said, “By sunrise the shift in power was so seismic the earth under the Capitol might as well have moved.”347 Perhaps the most restrained reporting was by NBC’s Tom Brokaw, who merely stated, “It was one of the most radical political shifts of the twentieth century.”348

Whatever the appropriate metaphor, Republicans were understandably jubilant upon hearing the news. The sweeping nature of the election prompted several leading Republicans to claim a mandate in the hours after the election. “If this is not a mandate to move in a particular direction, I would like somebody to explain to me what a mandate would look like,” proclaimed Newt Gingrich.349
Nevertheless, some Republicans, including Gingrich’s counterpart in the Senate, incoming Majority Leader Robert Dole, sounded a conciliatory tone when speaking of President Clinton, indicating that they were willing to cooperate on some issues. Indeed, several of the items in the Contract with America were policy areas in which the president had already indicated that he was interested in addressing. “If we’re going to make it work and make it last, we have to work together...If we fail to produce, we’ll be kicked out for a long time again,” Dole said. Gingrich, however, in a move that perhaps portended later political struggles, told a crowd in Washington, “We will cooperate with anyone and we will compromise with no one.”

President Clinton emerged from the 1994 election lost and confused, wounded by what Congressman Dave McCurdy (D-OK), who had just been defeated for a Senate seat, called “a visceral anti-Clinton sentiment…which is almost unfathomable to people who haven’t experienced it.” Appearing at a news conference the day after the election, the president seemed exhausted, confused, and unsure of himself. In response to a question about what message he was taking from the voters, the usually smooth Clinton replied, “Well, I think they were saying two things to me—or maybe three. They were saying—maybe 300.” Other Democrats had no trouble finding a lesson for the president. “I think for President Clinton there is a pretty blunt message,” said Al From, president of the Democratic Leadership Council, an centrist Democratic organization to which Clinton used to belong. “It’s ‘get with the program or you’ll have to pay the consequences.’”

Behind the scenes, as historian Steven Gillon writes, “Clinton was distraught at the election results. Aides found him surprisingly passive in the days following the election, as if he were in a state of shock. Bitterly disappointed in himself and his staff, he withdrew into
himself refusing to communicate or give clear direction.” In December, the president left town, heading back home to Arkansas to “water his roots.”

Echoing the Republicans, Clinton spoke of cooperation in the days after the election, inviting the new majority in Congress to join him in solving America’s most pressing problems. “I am ready to share responsibility with the Republican Party when they assume leadership in the Congress. I ask them only to join me in the center of the public debate,” he said at Georgetown University, his alma mater.

Other Democrats were more matter-of-fact in talking about their electoral defeat. “I’m going to go to Washington and clean out my desk,” said defeated Rep. Dan Rostenkowski (D-IL). “Well, we made history last night,” said Democratic National Committee Chairman David Wilhelm. “Call it what you want: an earthquake, a tidal wave, a blowout. We got our butts kicked.”

As the Democrats filtered back into Washington in late November for the lame-duck session and their leadership elections, they chose to keep their current leaders, Dick Gephardt as leader and David Bonior (D-MI) as whip, as they transitioned into minority status. It was clear, however, that they were unfamiliar with their new role, and that it would take them several months to truly formulate an effective strategy. When asked by the press how the new Republican majority planned to treat the Democrats, Rep. Bill Archer (R-TX), the incoming chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, replied, “We will be at least as accommodating to them as they have been to us.”

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Much like he did upon winning his first election to the House of Representatives in 1978, Newt Gingrich and the rest of the Republican leadership barely paused to rest after
their sweeping victory in the November 1994 midterm elections before returning to Washington to begin planning for their formal assumption of power the following January. Luckily for them, while the transition from Democratic to Republican control was truly to be a momentous event, it was one for which they had been planning for months.

In October 1993, when almost no one believed that the GOP would take over the majority in the next Congress, Dick Armey sagely wrote a memo to Newt Gingrich urging him and the rest of the leadership not to ignore the transition period in their campaign planning. Recalling recent history, Armey wrote, “When the Republicans won the Senate in 1980 they were woefully unprepared. We must not make that same mistake when we take over the House…Good planning now will keep us from making serious mistakes during the heat (and excitement) of the moment.” He assigned his chief of staff, Kerry Knott, to begin working on a plan and asked Newt to contribute a staff member as well.

Two months later, in December, Armey followed up on his initial transition planning with another, more detailed, memo to Gingrich. Outlining what he called the “Project Majority Contingency Plan,” Armey wrote, “This plan does not focus on what issues to push or setting a legislative timetable. Rather this plan will cover specifically how we handle the transition, including key appointments,…necessary Conference rules changes, how to handle committee ratios, budgets, etc. The plan also focuses on the critical time between the election in early November and our taking control in January…We will need a legal strategy, an auditing strategy, a media strategy, and a continual campaign strategy.”

Central to Armey’s strategy to create viable transition plan was the need to generate widespread support within the Republican Conference for a single, comprehensive plan. To do this, Armey adopted a strategy of member self-investment. He wrote in the December
memo, “I’ve been working on an outline for a plan and had intended to develop it quietly and privately over the next several months. After thinking more about it, however, I would like to enlist ranking members and other key GOP members in the process. By doing it this way we will probably get a better plan, plus more of our members will have an investment in the process.”\textsuperscript{362} As a result of this, as well as the fact that Knott was about to take over the planning for the Contract with America, Armey turned the transition planning over to Rep. Jim Nussle (R-IA), who had been a strong, activist member since his election to Congress in 1990.

Nussle quickly put together a committee of younger members to assist him in this task, including Reps. John Boehner (R-OH), Deborah Price (R-OH), Pete Hoekstra (R-MI), and Scott Klug (R-WI). Their work became increasingly important as the Contract with America took shape and it became clear that there would be little to no time at the beginning of the new Congress to organize the House. In typical years, the House would convene for the election of a speaker and approval of the rules during the first week of January and then recess several weeks before beginning legislative business. But considering the Republicans’ intent to fulfill the Contract with America and bring its items up for a vote within the first 100 days, Republican leaders planned to hit the ground running. “The first day of the next Congress is scheduled for January 4, when the new members will be sworn in,” reported \textit{The Washington Times}. “But rather than recess for about three weeks until the State of the Union address, the practice at the start of other sessions, House Republican leaders intend to keep the body in session.”\textsuperscript{363}

Eventually, Nussle and his team produced a flow chart that covered each aspect of the transition down to the very last detail. After Election Day, Nussle was then appointed the
official transition chairman by Newt Gingrich and began the implementation of his transition plan. “After months of planning,” Gingrich would later remember, “we were ready to take over the House on Wednesday morning, November 9. We had already scheduled a senior staff conference call, a senior planning group conference call, and a leadership conference call for the first day after the election. Now we were simply executing the first phase of the plan.”

Initially, many political observers thought of the Contract with America as a mere campaign gimmick. Used to the typical way that politicians treated promises, reporters were eager to know what exactly the Republicans planned to do with their majority. As Rep. Robert Walker (R-PA), one of Gingrich’s closest confidants, recalled:

“I still remember coming into town a day or so after the election and meeting in the Capitol building beginning to lay out our plans. We talked to the incoming committee chairmen and all that. When we walked out into the hallway, it was absolutely packed with press. I had never seen so many TV cameras and microphones in my life as there were in the hallway that day. Basically the first question for Newt was, ‘Well, what are you going to do now that you are in the majority?’ Newt said, ‘We’re going to do the Contract.’ The attitude of the press was, ‘Oh well that was all campaign garbage and so on. What are you really going to do?’ Newt said, ‘No, you don’t understand, the Contract to us is real. We really believe it. We really believe that we have a contract with the American people to do it, and we’re going to do exactly what we said we’re going to do, and we’re going to do it in the 100 days that we said we’re going to do it in.’

Reporters also underestimated the fervor behind the Republicans’ commitment to passing the Contract. But Republicans took it extremely seriously. “This contract is our Bible. It is our guiding set of principles for the first 100 days,” said Paxon on the day after the election.”

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Noah Weiss, College ’09
There was another reason, perhaps, behind the reporters’ incredulity: the extraordinary difficulty that it would take to bring ten bills to the floor for a vote in 100 days. Introducing major legislation, referring it to a subcommittee with hearings and markup, then to a full committee with hearings and markup, then to the Rules Committee, and the finally to the floor is a process that requires both great skill and great time. “When we settled on the 100 days it was because 100 days sounded good,” recalled Bob Walker, “but the fact is that you had to organize the committees, you had to get up and running, you had to get committee rules done, all before you could even move the first piece of legislation.” Gingrich appointed Armey to come up with a schedule, and he did so very effectively. Rep. Dennis Hastert (R-IL), at the time the chief deputy whip, recalled:

“Armey had lined up these measures and put them into a queue, as if they were on an assembly line. He had constructed a very elaborate matrix so we knew where everything was in every committee and subcommittee along the way for the first one hundred days, and it was designed so that the moment something veered off track, we would know about it immediately.”

Yet before the Republicans were ready to get to work on the Contract, there were many organizational tasks to accomplish. These tasks were made much harder by the fact that the Republicans, having been out of the majority for four decades, were unaccustomed to wielding the reins of power. “You have to remember, that that point we had no House Republicans either at the member level or the staff level who had ever served in the majority…so we had no idea what you needed to do to take over,” said Gingrich aide Jack Howard.

Logistical issues had to be taken care of first, even things that seemed to be the most basic operations possible. “We had been in the wilderness so long that nobody remembered anything about being in the leadership,” Hastert later recalled. “We didn’t know where the
special back rooms were; we didn’t even know where the keys to those rooms were. To remedy this problem, Gingrich’s staff literally went around and knocked on every door to find out what was going on in each room.

The finances of the House were also under majority control. In the days after the election, the Democrats handed over a large ledger in which the financial records of the House were kept. The Republicans were dismayed at what they found. “When we took over, they literally handed us a journal where they had kept the financial records of the House of Representatives. Hundreds of millions of dollars in expenditures. There were erasures, a little bit of white out here and there, it was a mess,” recalled Rep. Bill Paxon (R-NY). “Everything that could tell us how the House should be run was in chaos. In fact, the books were in such bad shape that an auditing firm could not even perform an audit,” said Hastert. The ledgers were later matched to other records and an independent auditing firm was hired to do a complete review of the House books, a procedure that has continued to occur in every year since.

An early fear among the Republicans was that the Democrats would destroy documents if they lost their majority. “The Democrats will be in panic and will be shredding more documents than Oliver North ever thought about,” wrote Armey to Gingrich in a December 20, 1993 memo. In the days immediately following the election, Gingrich sent a letter to outgoing Speaker Tom Foley asking him to cooperate in “making sure that official documents will not be removed or destroyed.” Gingrich and the other leaders also asked Foley to assist them in freezing committee spending for the last few months of Democratic control. Ever the distinguished gentlemen, the vanquished speaker and his staff acquiesced.
In mid-November, the GOP leadership turned their attention to the procedures of the House, and specifically to the committee system. During their years in the minority, Republicans had routinely complained of Democratic abuse of the committee systems. Overly skewed ratios, fervently liberal subcommittee chairmen, joint referrals of bill, and other tactics were partially responsible for the Republicans’ frustrations in the minority. Thus, when the GOP leaders began to examine the committee system, they had their eye on reducing its size and scope. “Our aim,” said Gingrich, “was to rethink the entire size and structure of Congress.”

Rep. David Dreier (R-CA) was given the job of leading a task force to streamline the House committee system. “My goal was to enhance the deliberative nature of the institution,” he said. “We had 266 committees and subcommittees, and the congressional bureaucracy was way too great.” One of the congressional reforms in the Contract with America was to reduce the number of committees and the number of staffers, and Dreier took to this task with relish. Eventually, the GOP decided to eliminate three full committees: District of Columbia, Merchant Marine and Fisheries, and Post Office and Civil Service. Several others that initially were on the chopping block like Veterans Affairs and Small Business were saved because of the Republicans’ strong ties to their lobbies. The most significant change came on the subcommittee level. Thirty-one of the 115 House Subcommittees were abolished and committee staff was reduced by one-third. “What some Democrats dismissed as a campaign gimmick, the Republican Contract with America so far turns out to be deadly serious. The Republicans plan to bring in an independent auditor to examine House books and to fire thousands of employees on Capitol Hill,” reported Bob Schieffer of CBS News.
Moreover, Dreier’s task force recommended the reallocation of jurisdictions to prevent against one committee from becoming too powerful and aimed to rename committees in order to refocus their efforts. Eventually, ten of the twenty-eight full committees were renamed, the reasoning being more substantial than just a mere indication of a new regime. As Dreier said:

“Renaming was about shifting the agenda away from big government. For example: Government Operations became Government Reform and Oversight, Education and Labor became Economic and Educational Opportunity, and Public Works and Transportation became Transportation and Infrastructure. The old names implied a desire to perpetuate and expand on the size and scope of government. The new names were needed to put our imprimatur on Congress and indicate the direction in which we’re taking the institution.”

As perhaps the most powerful incoming speaker since Joseph Cannon at the turn of the twentieth century, Newt Gingrich leveraged his power during the November reorganization to ensure that his handpicked people chaired the full committees in the House. Usually, the seniority system was ironclad, as it had been with the Democrats, with few exceptions, for decades. However, because the planks of the Contract with America would be going through the committee system in the first 100 days, the process of choosing committee chairs required Gingrich’s special attention. Passing the Contract was of the utmost importance, and Gingrich needed guarantees that this would happen. By making sure that committee chairs were responsive to the party leadership, “the leadership sought to ensure that the key elements of the legislative program would not be compromised before they reached the floor.”

The process was described by Bob Walker:

“What we had to do was convince some committee chairmen that they were going to do this and they were going to do it in the time frame that we said. Some of them came in and said, ‘Well I have my own agenda,’ and Newt would point out to them, ‘No, you don’t have your own agenda until we are
finished with the Conference’s agenda.’ We had a couple of people come in and say to us, ‘Well I’ve been talking to my staff and they don’t think we can get this done in the period of time that was set.’ And Newt would say, ‘You don’t think you can get it done?’ ‘Well my staff says we can’t.’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I think I can probably find somebody for your job who has a staff that knows they can get it done.’ ‘Oh no, Mr. Speaker, we’ll do it then.’ So there were some of those fairly hard-nosed discussions. There were a couple of people who thought they were going to become committee chairmen that didn’t get the job because this relatively small group of people that had started meeting in the basement of the taco place sat in a room and made some decisions on who was going to get promoted and who wasn’t.”

Although by and large Gingrich followed the seniority system after having these hard-nosed discussions, there were a few cases in which he reached further down the seniority ladder to find his preferred chairman. Reps. Robert Livingston (R-LA), Thomas Bliley (R-VA), and Henry Hyde (R-IL) were made the chairmen of Appropriations, Commerce, and Judiciary, respectively, even though none of these members were the most senior on their panel. In Livingston’s case, Gingrich jumped four other members who were more senior to him to make him the chairman. Each of these chairmen were seen to be more active and assertive (although not necessarily more conservative), as well as more likely to pursue a party-favored agenda. However, he did not merely install someone who would not have the support of the committee members. “Newt would not have picked me had it not been all right with the other Appropriations members,” said Livingston. Furthermore, the Appropriations cardinals—the subcommittee chairs—were required to pledge their loyalty to the Conference to secure their positions. The biggest loser in this committee reshuffling was Rep. Carlos Moorhead (R-CA), who was passed over for the chairmanships of both Judiciary and Commerce. As Gingrich press secretary Tony Blankley recalled:

“We went through the campaign to accomplish certain things if we won. Newt and the leaders wanted to put the right people in charge. The most
painful decision was not giving a full chairmanship to Carlos Moorhead. He is a very loyal, hard-working member. Basically, Newt thought that Carlos was too nice and amiable a person to fight at the level we would have to fight. The Judiciary Committee has the likes of [Democratic Reps.] Chuck Schumer and Barney Frank. The chair would have to fend off those people on a daily basis. He wasn’t sure that Carlos was up to that.”

According to political scientist Nicol Rae, “No Democratic speaker in the modern era would have presumed to attempt this.” Nevertheless, Gingrich’s political position was extremely strong. Not only had he led his party to its first majority in forty years, but also had the unconditional support of the younger members, many of whom had gotten their start in politics by listening to his GOPAC tapes. Additionally, during the 1994 campaign, Newt had visited over 130 congressional districts and raised millions of dollars for Republican candidates, who in turn felt that they owed him their seats. These young members comprised a significant portion of the Republican Conference; the seventy-three freshmen and forty-eight sophomores easily combined for a majority of the 231 member House GOP.

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On December 1, the seventy-three GOP freshmen members arrived for orientation. They flooded into Washington for their first round of meetings and then the next day were bused to a three-day session in Baltimore jointly organized by the Heritage Foundation and Jack Kemp’s political advocacy group, Empower America. The Heritage program was fairly new, only having been started after the 1992 election. Before, freshman orientation was organized at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, but Republicans complained that it was too liberal in focus. The Heritage program was started as another option for Republican freshmen, and in 1994, suddenly became the dominant
program because of the size of the GOP freshman class.\textsuperscript{386} Ironically, when it became clear that no Republican freshmen would attend, Harvard canceled their orientation.

In Baltimore, Heritage had put together an impressive schedule. The freshmen received a handbook on implementing the Contract with America and sessions were held on policy issues such as welfare reform, farm subsidies, congressional reform, and the federal budget. Heritage also attracted an formidable list of speakers including Kemp, Paul Gigot of the \textit{Wall Street Journal}, former Tennessee Governor and Education Secretary Lamar Alexander, Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition, former UN ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick, former Education Secretary and Drug Czar William Bennett, \textit{Forbes Magazine} publisher Steve Forbes, Republican strategist William Kristol, and talk radio host Rush Limbaugh. Although all the speakers received warm welcomes from the freshmen, Limbaugh clearly was a celebrity. For many of them, Limbaugh had been someone who had provided encouragement to them long before they decided to run for Congress. Indeed, he was probably more responsible than anyone for getting them elected. GOP pollster Frank Luntz conducted a poll in which he found that people who listened to talk radio more than ten hours a week voted three-to-one for the Republicans. The freshmen even made Limbaugh an honorary member of their class.\textsuperscript{387}

More important, however, the Heritage orientation program made the freshmen a unit, a cohesive class through which they would be able to drive the agenda once they took their oaths as members of Congress. “They bused us to Baltimore to attend the Heritage Foundation’s orientation. It was a fantastic event, all of the Republican freshmen were there, and it really made us come together as a class,” recalled freshman Jon Christensen of Nebraska.\textsuperscript{388}
Indeed, from the outset, it was clear that the freshmen were different. They were young—over half of them were under 45 years old—and many of them were political neophytes, never having run for public office before. Even more significant, however, was that they were true believers in the revolution; they campaigned on a platform that was fiercely anti-government, anti-Washington, and anti-politics-as-usual. They were the fire-breathing activists that Newt Gingrich, Bob Walker, and Vin Weber were when they founded the Conservative Opportunity Society in 1983. “Newt’s looking at us in his own likeness,” freshman Republican Mark Foley of Florida said.389

Indeed, the Republican freshmen preferred to think of themselves as outsiders, elected to clean up the mess in Washington. Many, in fact, had been convinced to run by observing what was going on in the nation’s capital. Normally, the National Republican Congressional Committee is charged with recruiting candidates to run for office, but, as the NRCC’s chairman, Rep. Bill Paxon, recalled:

“People were just coming in. In 1994, because of the national political climate, there were a lot of people who really wanted to run. A lot of them had never been involved in politics. They didn’t come to me and say, as candidates did before and since, ‘Alright, I’m thinking about running for Congress. How much money are you going to give me and what committee assignments am I going to have?’ Instead, I’d have these candidates come to Washington and stop in and they’d say, ‘I’m running, I don’t care if I have any money from you, and I don’t care what committees I get because I’m only going to serve for six years.’ They just didn’t care. It was this prairie fire that ran across the country.”390

Many of those who decided to run were already involved in politics in some way or another, whether they had run for state office or had served on a politician’s staff. However, many others were businessmen, lawyers, community leaders, and other outsiders that saw an opportunity to run for Congress. Several of the freshmen cited Bill Clinton and the
Democratic Congress as their motivation to run. “Clinton brought many conservatives out of the woodwork, including people who had never thought they would run for office, like me,” said freshman Mark Souder (R-IN).391 “In 1992, I just didn’t like the way that our current congressman was representing what I believed to be a more conservative district than his opinions and his votes were reflecting. I didn’t have any past political experience, but just felt that he was not reflective of the second district of Nebraska. I decided that was going to take him on and win. I don’t know what made me think I could do that, but I just jumped into it,” recalled Christensen.392 “The reason that I needed to be in D.C. was that my values as a father, youth minister, husband, and businessman are under attack in the United States today as never before,” said Rep. J.C. Watts (R-OK).393 “I thought Bill Clinton was the worst president the country had ever had, and without a Republican Congress to balance his views we wouldn’t recognize the country anymore,” said Rep. Van Hilleary (R-TN).394

Perhaps because of their fierce anti-government stances, when the freshmen arrived in Washington, they were unschooled in and antithetical to Congress’ institutional norms. They wanted to accomplish a revolution and they wanted to do it now. To them, the staid ways of Washington were the embodiment of what was wrong with the system. “Our class symbol should be the bumblebee,” boasted freshman Gil Gutknecht (R-MN). “Aeronautical engineers say the bumblebee can’t fly…but the bumblebee flies because he never studies aeronautical engineering.”395 “It was an infusion of brand new ideas,” said Scott Bensing, who was the legislative director to freshman Republican John Ensign (R-NV). “None of them came in with this congressional box, thinking ‘OK, we’re freshmen, we have to act this way.’ They had no idea. So they fought to bring a brand new perspective to the House.”396
The attitude and makeup of the class of 1994 was eerily similar to another activist freshman class that had taken Washington by storm, the Democratic freshmen of 1974. Elected in the wake of the Watergate scandal, the Democratic freshmen of 1974 arrived in the capital pushing for change and congressional reform, and refusing to take no for an answer. Both classes—1974 and 1994—were large, seventy-five and seventy-three members respectively, and although they would be on opposite sides of the political spectrum, “in their temperament and approach they were soulmates.”\textsuperscript{397}

Upon arriving in Washington, the brash freshmen of 1974 set out to make their mark. “We had a real sense of urgency. We thought we were special. We thought we were different. We came here to take the Bastille,” said Rep. George Miller (D-CA), a member of the class.\textsuperscript{398} As future House Speaker Tom Foley recalled, the freshmen came to the House “with unbelievable assertiveness.”\textsuperscript{399} At the start of the 94\textsuperscript{th} Congress in January 1975, the freshmen invited every committee chairman to address them. One such chairman was F. Edward Hébert of Louisiana. A real power in the House who often referred to himself as the Grand Titan,\textsuperscript{400} Hébert had once tried to block the appointment of Reps. Pat Schroeder and Ron Dellums—a woman and an African American—to his committee. Unsuccessful in this effort, Hébert announced that “while he might not be able to control the makeup of the committee, he could damn well control the number of chairs in the hearing room…He said that women and blacks were worth only half of one ‘regular’ member, so he added only one seat to the committee room and made Ron and me share it,” recalled Schroeder.\textsuperscript{401} Hébert showed no more courtesy to the 1974 freshmen, giving them a “speech about how freshmen should be content to sit quietly and learn the ropes for a few years.”\textsuperscript{402} The freshmen were so enraged that they voted en masse to remove him, providing enough votes in the Democratic
Caucus to remove him. Two other chairmen, W.R. Poage of Agriculture and Wright Patman of Banking and Currency, were deposed in similar fashion.

The freshmen of 1974 were also not content to follow the old maxim for freshmen to be seen and not heard. As former House Speaker Tip O’Neill recalled, “In years past, most of us had been reluctant to appear on the national Sunday-morning talk shows like Meet the Press and Face the Nation. These forums were the exclusive prerogative of the senior members, and anyone who violated this unwritten rule was seen as an upstart who needed his wings clipped. But the new members of the mid-1970s had no such reservations.” Eventually, the class of 1974 would succeed in limiting the power of the committee chairmen and drive much of the congressional reform agenda of the late-1970s, as the Congress sought to restore some of its power after the encroachments of the Nixon Administration.

Much like the 1974 freshmen, the militant freshmen of 1994 were at the vanguard of the revolution, and their impact was felt almost immediately. Upon their return to Washington after the Heritage Foundation’s orientation program, the House Republican Conference held their leadership elections to organize for the next Congress. Although there was never any doubt that Newt Gingrich would be elected as speaker and Dick Armey chosen to be majority leader, several other races were hotly contested, including the races for whip and Conference chairman. The whip’s race was symbolic of the others, pitting two exceptional and experienced members, Bob Walker and Tom DeLay, against each other. Both DeLay and Walker had been members of the inner leadership circle for years, and had put aside their differences to work together in late 1993 and 1994. However, DeLay had a distinct advantage, having visited many of the freshmen’s districts during the campaign and helped fundraise. “During that harried election season,” DeLay later recalled, “I had traveled
to twenty-five states in support of candidates, and had developed fund-raising networks that covered every state in the nation. To help the Republicans achieve victory, I had even run a candidate school that got down to such details as talking points and yard signs. I personally worked with and supported some eighty candidates, and by the time seventy of them entered the freshman class, I had commitments from fifty-three to support me for Republican whip.”

As Walker said:

“The whip race was an interesting thing because the two people who were contending for the job had been meeting somewhat clandestinely for months. So even in the midst of a race for whip, we were sitting down and talking in very intimate details about what it was we were doing going forward. It was an interesting dynamic. In the end, I had one view of how whip should operate and Tom had another view, and he backed up his view by going out and getting 10,000 dollars to everyone running for Congress. I refused to put together a leadership PAC and raise any money to do it. I made some contributions out of my own campaign fund to other candidates, but I just didn’t do that. The fact was that most of the freshmen arrived and they didn’t know either of us, but they knew there was one guy who had given them 10,000 bucks. So I had a hard time getting the freshmen. But they did end up confused when it became clear to them that Newt wanted me to be elected and that Newt was voting for me, but not confused enough that they ended up voting for me. So I got the majority of the votes of those who had served with both of us, and he got all but 9 or 10 votes from the freshmen.”

In each of the contested races, the freshmen’s votes proved decisive, as the Conference elected DeLay as whip, John Boehner (R-OH) as Conference chair, and Chris Cox (R-CA) as policy chair. “We elected a leadership that agreed with the freshman class,” said Souder, speaking of the newly elected leadership in terms of their conservatism and energy. Rounding out the leadership positions were Susan Molinari (R-NY) as Conference vice chair and Barbara Vucanovich (R-NV) as Conference secretary, the first two women to serve in the leadership of either party.
Because the freshmen were, of all the groups of members in the House, most in tune with the sweeping goals of the leadership, the freshmen were given positions on the most select committees in Congress. Three freshmen were appointed to Ways and Means, seven to Appropriations, and one to Rules. Moreover, two freshmen, David McIntosh of Indiana and Tom Davis of Virginia—were appointed subcommittee chairmen. Although these actions ruffled the feathers of some of the more senior members, the fact that without the freshmen the Republicans would not be in the majority was enough to quell their unrest. “Every senior member recognizes that, without the freshmen, they would not be in positions of leadership in this Congress. It happened that these guys made us a majority,” said Walker.

Once the House was organized through the selection of its leaders and the committee chairs, Gingrich and the other leaders organized mock sessions to teach Republicans how to behave in the majority. Bob Walker, who had long been the Republicans’ best floor tactician, held training sessions on floor procedure. Gerald Solomon, the incoming chairman of the Rules Committee, taught the intricacies of the rules. Tom DeLay, the whip, talked about voting procedure. Other Republicans played the roles of key Democratic opponents in order to give the members experience in floor debate.

Although not a single member of the Republican Conference had ever served as a member of the majority (the only member of Congress who had seen a GOP majority was 88 year old Democrat Sidney Yates of Illinois), one member of the GOP, Rep. Bill Emerson of Missouri had been a 16 year old page during the 83rd Congress in 1954. In deference to his long years of service, the GOP leadership often had Emerson sit in the speaker’s chair during these mock sessions. In a story related by reporter Major Garrett, as Emerson was
descending from the rostrum during one of these sessions, the footing was so unfamiliar that he fell, seriously injuring his ankle. No one thought of it as an omen of bad luck, but merely a reminder that the footing is trickier at the higher altitudes of power.\textsuperscript{409}

The most important aspect of the transition period, however, was the Republicans’ reaffirmation of their desire to remake Washington. In many ways, they truly believed they were revolutionaries, and intended to radically change the way that the political establishment acted as well as the direction in which the country was moving. “We intend to be revolutionaries in the sense that we are actually going to do after the election what we said we were going to do before the election,” proclaimed Gingrich on Election Day, referring to the Contract with America.\textsuperscript{410} Rep. John Kasich (R-OH), the incoming chairman of the Budget Committee, said, “We’re interested in very big, systemic changes. We would have a dramatically smaller federal government. We would attempt to give people their money back. We would begin to dismantle the New Deal.”\textsuperscript{411}

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Just as the Republicans were finding their sea-legs as the majority in the House during the transition, the Democrats were gaining more confidence in their new role as the minority party. Although the White House was providing precious little guidance at first, the House Democrats turned to another powerful force in Washington for direction, Newt Gingrich.

During his rise to power in the 1980s, Gingrich had proven his steeliness of will during his long campaign to topple Speaker of the House James Wright (D-TX) on ethics charges relating to Wright’s book deal. Gingrich’s goal was to discredit the speaker and
make him a symbol of Democratic corruption in Washington. In the very same way, the House Democratic minority in 1995 used similar tactics to go after Gingrich.

For many years, Gingrich had taught a college course at Kennesaw State College entitled “Renewing American Civilization.” Although Gingrich was not paid for his teaching, the cost of recording and distributing the course via videotape and satellite to students around the country—about $300,000—was covered by the same donors who donated to Gingrich’s political action committee, GOPAC. House Democrats seized on this issue, claiming that Gingrich’s course was not solely educational, but rather intended to benefit GOP candidates.

Additionally, on December 21, Gingrich finalized his own book deal that would pay him an advance of $4.5 million. Although House rules do not prohibit income from book royalties, they do require them to be “received from established publishers under usual and customary contractual terms.” Understandably, Democrats pounced, calling for a full investigation of the deal. “We need to lift this cloud over his head,” said Democratic whip David Bonior of Gingrich, “if in fact it can be lifted.” Even the president couldn’t help but to take a shot at Gingrich. In an offhand comment to the press, Clinton remarked, “I made $35,000 a year for twelve years [as Arkansas governor] and I was glad of it.” The Democrats got help from the same public interest organizations that helped Gingrich in his efforts against Wright. “It certainly seems like Representative Gingrich is out to capitalize on the office of the speaker before he even enters the job,” said Common Cause President Fred Wertheimer. “This is an extraordinary act for a new speaker...who has spent his entire career attacking the ethics rules of congressional Democrats.”

Responding to the pressure from the press and the congressional Democrats, Gingrich agreed to forgo the advance on December 30. “We’re about to have the first Republican
Congress in forty years,” he said. “And I did not want to walk in next Wednesday and give the embittered defenders of the old order something that they could run around and yell about.”416 However much the Democrats resented Gingrich’s own use of these tactics against Speaker Wright in the late 1980s, their use of them proved they were effective.

As the start of the 104th Congress neared, nonetheless, the Democrats were still reaching for an effective long-term strategy to oppose the new Republican majority. In this, they faced several significant challenges. First of all, just as the Republicans had trouble adjusting to the majority, the Democrats had no experience in the minority. Especially since they had been in charge for forty consecutive years, as political scientist Dean McSweeney writes, “It was to be expected that adjustment to minority status would create stresses greater than for any previous minority.”417 Second, President Clinton had almost completely ceded legislative initiative to the House Republicans. With Gingrich driving the debate, the Democrats could not look to the White House for their cues as the Republicans had been able to do during the presidencies of Reagan and Bush. Third, the Democrats were confronting the most unified and driven majority in nearly a century. Up against a phalanx of Republicans marching to the step of the Contract with America, the Democrats could do little to stop, or even alter the course of, the GOP onslaught. Finally, Democrats in the House had to confront the same procedures that were designed to protect majority interests that they had themselves devised during their long tenure in control. Ironically, “procedural domination now had to be withstood by the minority which had accentuated majority rule.”418

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After a successful transition, the Republicans formally took the reins of power in the House of Representatives on January 4, 1995. However, in the midst of their celebratory day,
the Republicans were not content to rest on their laurels. Instead, the House immediately jumped into action at the end of swearing-in ceremony. The first day was an omen of things to come, a marathon fourteen and a half hour session that did not end until 2:30 a.m. the following morning.

On the first day, the Republicans displayed incredible unity in instituting the initial congressional reforms listed in the Contract with America. Three full committees were abolished as well as thirty-one subcommittees and one-third of congressional staff. Committee chairs were term-limited to six years in their position, and the speaker of the House could only serve eight years as speaker. These measures were designed to prohibit "kingdom building" by committee chairs. "That will cut down on the number of powerful little fiefdoms," Walker said.419

Legislative Service Organizations—basically research and advisory organizations that were funded by the House—were eliminated, cutting ninety-six staff positions and saving $4 million.420 Democrats were enraged at the elimination of LSOs, pointing especially to the Congressional Black Caucus and the Democratic Study Group. Although most LSOs had bipartisan membership, these two were chosen by Democrats to illustrate what they claimed was partisan politics designed to "get at the Democratic organizations that had clout."421 The CBC continued to exist, but no longer had staff or offices paid for by the House of Representatives. The DSG attempted to attract private funding for its services to continue.

In addition, the Republicans eliminated proxy voting—the system through which committee chairmen and ranking minority members controlled the votes of absent members of their party. Proxy voting was long identified by the Republican minority as a Democratic abuse of power since a committee chairman could win a vote even if he was the only member
of the majority present. The Republicans also abolished the practice of referring bills to multiple committees, a tactic that the Democrats had frequently used to bottle-up legislation.

Another reform of the first day was the passage of the Congressional Accountability Act, which made Congress subject to eleven federal laws applying to the private sector, including the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the American with Disabilities Act, the Family Medical Leave Act, and the Federal Service Labor Management Relations Act. The Congressional Accountability Act also set up an Office of Compliance that was charged with implementing the laws and providing a method for dispute resolution. The Act passed unanimously. This was perhaps the most telling development of the day. Despite the Democrats’ willingness to unanimously vote for the bill once it was brought to a vote under a Republican majority, the exact same legislation had not been able to become law when they controlled the Congress.

“I am very proud of the changes we made on the first day,” said freshman Rep. Rick White (R-WA). “I will definitely talk about them in my 1996 campaign because they have changed the way Congress does business.” After fourteen long hours of debate in the House, the GOP leadership introduced the ten Contract with America bills at the end of the first day and they were referred to the appropriate committees. The clock to 100 days was ticking.

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The institutional reforms passed on the first day of the 104th Congress were some of the most revolutionary successes of the new Republican majority. For decades, the House had been trying to reform itself, most recently with the 1973 Bolling Report, which called for a “complete restructuring that touched on twenty of our twenty-one committees.”
Unfortunately, the Report was “too extensive to win widespread support, and required too many sacrifices from the members.” As such, most of its recommendations were abandoned.

Yet change had come slowly, though more often than not, the changes wrought in the late 1970s and early 1980s had done little but enhance the power of the majority party broadly speaking, and the speaker in particular. For many, the centralization of leadership in the speaker was the most effective way to combat what the majority Democrats saw as the creeping influence of conservative government under Ronald Reagan.

In one sense, many of the reforms enacted on the 104th Congress’ opening day were simply a reaction against the way the House had been run for decades. The abolition of proxy voting reduced the power of the majority party in committees. The elimination of three full committees and thirty-one subcommittees reduced the power base of the majority and made it much harder for the majority party to bottle-up unwanted legislation. The terms of the committee chairmen and the speaker, the most powerful members of the majority party, were limited to six and eight years, respectively, to prevent the long-term consolidation of power. The audit performed on the House books by an independent agency opened the House up to a new era of transparency and accountability. Even the reduction of committee staff—billed as a cost-cutting, efficiency promoting reform—was also partially aimed at reducing the power of the majority party, since oftentimes the majority controlled up to three times as many staffers as the minority. For instance, the House Resources Committee had seventy-two staffers in the 103rd Congress, fifty-four for the Democrats and eighteen for the Republicans. This was epidemic throughout the House.
Several of these reforms, of course, can be placed in a broader movement over the last quarter of the twentieth century to reduce the power of the committee system and increase the power of the leadership. Since the Watergate baby class of 1974, Congress has been moving toward restricting the power of the committee chairs. The reforms in January 1995 continued this process. Term-limits prevented kingdom-building, reducing the number of committees and subcommittees slashed the number of fiefdoms in the House. The elimination of committee staff reduced the bureaucratization and overspecialization of the committee system.

The Congressional Accountability Act, a reform that most Americans had never even thought of—why wouldn’t Congress be subject to the laws it passes?—indicated a new attitude in the Congress. It also helped Republicans reinforce their accountability message found in the Contract with America.

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In the weeks and months after the opening of the 104th Congress, the House of Representatives showed no signs of slowing their breakneck pace. On the first day of the session, the Congressional Accountability Act was passed, along with a resolution banning unfunded mandates to states and localities. The Senate, perhaps taken by the uncommon legislative zeal displayed by the House, took up both measures and passed them within a week. President Clinton signed them into law, a very successful beginning to the first Republican Congress in four decades.

Over the next few weeks, the thirty-one bills related to the ten planks of the Contract with America moved through Congress with dizzying speed. Emboldened by their claimed mandate for change and signed pledges in the Contract, the Republicans marched in lockstep
toward their goal of passing the promised legislation. Each bill was considered in 
subcommittee and in full committee, given hearings, markups, and votes, and then brought to 
the floor for debate and final passage. Such a workload forced members to work harder than 
they had in years, and oftentimes built an atmosphere of stress and exhaustion. “With an 
energy and determination I had seldom seen in my eight years on Capitol Hill, members 
pushed themselves and stayed up until two, three, four in the morning to complete the 
Contract with America in that first 100 days,” recalled Hastert. Republican pollster Frank 
Luntz, who continued working for the House Republicans after they had won the majority, 
said, “The first 100 days started off with a complete disbelief and it degenerated into chaos 
and confusion and that degenerated into the most incredible stress and exhaustion. To get ten 
pieces of legislation in 100 days doesn’t happen ever. People would be in session until 2:00 
am. and they’d come back in at nine in the morning.”

The freshmen were particularly stressed. As Scott Bensing remembered, “The first 
100 days was total chaos. All these new members were trying to set up offices and bring in 
staff. At the same time, there was a huge learning curve for the freshmen. They immediately 
had to get up to speed with the intricacies of dozens of issues. None of this dampened their 
enthusiasm, however. They still believed they had a mission to accomplish.”

Especially tough was the workload of the Judiciary and Ways and Means Committees, 
through which much of the Contract legislation moved. According to one Ways and Means 
member, freshman Representative Phil English (R-PA), during the first 100 days “it was 
constantly burning the candle at both ends. It was a dizzying series of hearings in my 
committee, reporting out a product, getting it to the House floor, and driving forward the 
debate.” Such a large amount of legislation required the expertise of impeccably qualified
chairmen, which Newt Gingrich had in the persons of Henry Hyde (R-IL) and Bill Archer (R-TX) on Judiciary and Ways and Means, respectively. Both had long been players in the House Republican Party, with Hyde holding a leadership position as chairman of the Republican Policy Committee and Archer being the ranking member on Ways and Means for the previous six years.

Not only did the Republicans have to shepherd the bills through committee, but they also had to ensure that each measure had sufficient votes to pass when it came to the floor. As Hastert, who served as the chief deputy whip, said, “If you’re in the majority, you can’t bring a piece of legislation to the floor unless you know you have the votes to pass it. You need to know ahead of time, and those commitments need to be ironclad.”

Considering the incredible amount of legislation being passed in such a short amount of time, the job of Hastert and the Whip Tom DeLay was incredibly stressful. At any given time, over fifty-five deputy whips worked votes, contacting members in their offices and at their homes, calling their wives and children, and knowing where every member stood on every piece of legislation. The whip system DeLay and Hastert devised served the Republican majority well as they considered the Contract items with their slim, thirteen-vote majority.

In the midst of the stressful atmosphere, the Contract proceeded on schedule. By mid-February, several Contract items had been passed by the House, including a bill to abolish unfunded mandates, a balanced budget constitutional amendment, and the line-item veto. These proposals had been specifically selected to come up first, since each of them were relatively uncontroversial and would win broad support among both House Democrats and Republicans. “We had deliberately put the easiest votes early so we could practice with minimum risk,” Gingrich recalled, referring to the GOP’s inexperience as the majority party.
“This enabled us to win early victories and build momentum. But it also left the hardest votes for when we would be most exhausted.”

The real meat of the Contract began to come to the House floor by the end of February, in the forms of the crime bill, the national defense plank, and the welfare reform bill. Republicans continued to march in lock-step, although they showed a shrewd sense of what they could accomplish in the short, 100 day time frame. The crime bill was a good example of their strategy.

Realizing that any crime bill that repealed the assault weapons ban passed in the Clinton 1994 crime bill would be vetoed, the GOP leadership decided not to include its repeal for fear that a fight over it would overshadow the rest of the Contract. “We didn’t want this package of provisions to be drowned out by a furor over assault weapons. We wanted to focus the public’s attention on the other issues in the legislation,” said Paul McNulty, the chief counsel of the House Subcommittee on Crime. Instead, Republicans decided to concentrate on other crime issues such as limiting death row appeals, constructing prisons, expanding the “good faith” exception to warrantless searches, deportation of criminal aliens, and other crime matters. The crime bill was then broken into six different bills in order to limit amendments and draw Democratic support. All but one of the bills passed with huge margins, and the one that was narrowly approved still drew 18 Democratic votes.

During the debate over the national security bill, the Democrats showed why they were still relevant. The bill contained billions in funding for space-based Ballistic Missile Defense, which critics called “Star Wars.” Although the National Security Committee had defeated an amendment offered by Rep. John Spratt (D-SC) that would have redirected
funding from space-based missiles to ground-based missiles while in committee, Spratt reoffered his amendment during floor debate. The amendment drew support from Republican moderates and deficit-hawks concerned about costly defense programs and passed by a razor-thin margin of 218-212. The entire bill passed 241-181.

The GOP leadership was shocked by the success of the Spratt Amendment; they had assumed that since it had been defeated in committee it would be defeated on the floor. However, in an odd way, the defeat was a good thing for the Republican leadership. It reminded them that they couldn’t take their majority for granted; indeed, each vote would have to be carefully whipped in order to ensure sufficient support. In Gingrich’s eyes, it was good that the surprise had come early in the voting on Contract legislation; they would be more vigilant from then on.433

The Democrats should have drawn a lesson from their victory with the Spratt Amendment. In this case, the liberal Democratic leadership, usually on frosty terms with their more conservative members, allowed the conservatives to lead the opposition and propose reasonable alternatives to the Republicans’ bill. By doing this, the Democrats were able to stay united while drawing support from moderate Republicans. Yet, the Democratic leadership seemed clueless as to the reasons behind their success, and would revert back to their usual practice of selecting more liberal members to lead the opposition. This would drive more conservative Democrats into voting with the Republicans.434

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President Clinton had largely kept a low profile during the first few months of Republican control, a trend that had begun in the days after the November election. At first, it was unclear how the president fit into the new political order. Although the 103rd Congress
returned to Washington at the end of November for a lame-duck session to pass Clinton’s GATT trade agreement, it was clear that the president did not know how to conduct himself or his White House in the weeks following the election. Clinton took refuge in foreign travel and a trip home to Arkansas near the end of the year while he and his advisors formulated a strategy to regroup.

The public was not giving the White House the signals it was hoping for. An NBC News-Wall Street Journal poll conducted during the week following the election showed that the public, by a margin of 55 percent to 30 percent, wanted the Republican Congress, not the Clinton White House, to set the agenda in Washington. From his highs of 50 percent the week before the election, Clinton’s approval ratings sunk back into the mid-forties, hovering between 42 to 45 percent for much of December and January. Even more worrisome for the White House, a poll conducted by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press in early December found Clinton trailing a generic Republican opponent for the 1996 election and fully two-thirds of Democrats wanted to see other candidates challenge Clinton for the Democratic nomination.\textsuperscript{435} An embodiment of this warning sign appeared on December 15, when incoming House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt announced his own tax-cut proposal to counter the Republicans’ plan on the same day that Clinton was to give an address to the nation announcing a White House proposal, prompting political observers to speculate about a possible Gephardt primary challenge.

Clinton met with the bipartisan leadership of the House and Senate for the first time on January 5. Nevertheless, Clinton still had trouble figuring out where he fit into the political landscape. No clear message emanated from the White House in the first weeks of 1995, allowing the Republican Congress to dominate both the agenda and the news coverage.
“I guess he’s going to wait until the State of the Union to tell us how he fits into the government,” said Charles O. Jones, a fellow at the Brookings Institution.436

Yet even the State of the Union could not rescue the president from relative obscurity. Clinton gave the longest address in American history, an 81 minute, oftentimes rambling speech that was below par, in the opinion of most observers. “The State of the Union Message that the president delivered tonight was notably short on demands for action and long on appeals for comity, a demonstration of just how much he has been weakened in the last 12 months,” opined the New York Times.437

Amid the onslaught of legislation being moved in the House, Clinton found himself struggling to compete for attention, a rarity for modern presidents. In fact, the media lavished much of its attention (and ink) on Newt Gingrich. The news seemed to be, in the words of the Washington Post, “all Newt, all the time.”438 “It was as if a new king or new president had been elected,” recalled Clinton Treasury Secretary Robert Reich.439 “Newt is king of the world. I don’t think there was any doubt that he was trying to signal that he, not Bill Clinton, was the most powerful person in Washington,” said White House economic advisor Gene Sperling.440 Gingrich cultivated this air of great importance. “Officially the ceremony marked the opening of the 104th Congress,” wrote Time of the January 4 opening of the new Congress, “but more important, it marked the beginning of an extraordinary period in American history in which the president of the United States will in effect share power with the speaker of the House.”441

The grandiose words of Time rang true in the first few months of 1995. As Clinton struggled to stay relevant, the House Republicans seemed to be enjoying victory after victory in their legislative program. As Clinton pollster Dick Morris recalled, “Each week in
February and March the House Republicans, shaped into a phalanx by Newt Gingrich’s discipline, passed bill after bill to implement their Contract with America. Democrats and the White House seemed to oppose every step in some of the rawest partisan fighting that Washington had seen in decades. Tempers flared, insults flew, but the march of legislation went on without any break in ranks...The president was largely irrelevant as the House drove the government.”

Clinton seemed powerless to stop the Republican advance, and was unsure how to respond to the Republicans’ success. “There was a feeling of plummeting, and not knowing when your feet would touch bottom, if ever,” said presidential speechwriter Michael Waldman. “We were floundering,” recalled White House communications director George Stephanopoulos. “As Newt Gingrich was orchestrating House passage of the Contract with America, we were responding with a symphony of mixed signals.”

“February and March were truly the Gingrich administration,” wrote Morris. “Even Dole was an afterthought in the Republican revolution who couldn’t keep pace with his House colleague. Clinton was invisible. The nation watched the Republican Congress grind on with its agenda. It was a withering sight.”

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Although the Republicans were incredibly successful during February and March in plowing through the Contract’s agenda, tensions certainly existed among House Republicans, especially between the freshmen and the rest of the Conference. For the most part, the GOP freshmen were some of the most ideologically conservative and inflexible members of the 104th Congress. Indeed, as historian Julian Zelizer writes, “The seventy-three freshmen were an extremely cohesive group of individuals who were convinced they had a mandate and
cared little about their political future." Freed from the typical preoccupations of being reelected, the freshmen were determined to drive the revolution as far and as fast as they possibly could. The fact that many had term-limited themselves (and planned to vote for a constitutional amendment for term limits when the final part of the Contract came up in late March) proved to be strong motivation for accomplishing their goals quickly.

Unschooled in the ways of Congress, there was no limit to the freshmen’s ambitious plans. “Our class is here to ask why,” said freshman Rep. Steve Largent (R-OK). “Why do we have to do that? Why do we have to pay that much? Why can't we cut that, why can't we reduce that?” As such, they had little patience for the idea that compromise was a legislative fact of life. As journalist Linda Killian writes, “The freshmen believe their ideological purity not only on spending and government reform but on many social issues sets them apart from their elders. They are extremely skeptical of deal-makers like Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, whom they consider all too willing to compromise.” Therefore, the freshmen disdained moderate members of their own party nearly as much as they did Democrats, since the moderates tended to cut deals and compromise, thus, in the eyes of the more conservative freshmen, weakening the thrust of the revolution.

Initially, the freshmen and the leadership shared a very strong relationship; after all, Gingrich and the other leaders had put freshmen on exclusive committees, gave two of them seats at the leadership table, and encouraged them to develop their ideas. No doubt this was a way to win their loyalty and support, since the freshmen knew that the leadership was treating them extraordinarily well. By the end of the transition, a very strong bond had formed between the freshmen and the leadership. In fact, Gingrich, Armey, DeLay, and
other members of the leadership had traveled to hundreds of congressional districts during the 1994 campaign to help members get elected.

Yet the leadership’s dependence on the freshmen to form a significant part of their power base was also a double-edged sword. Just as the leadership derived much of their power from the freshmen, the freshmen exerted significant power over the leadership, especially when they acted as a cohesive group, as the freshmen of the 104th Congress were prone to do. The leadership could hardly afford an open break with the freshmen, since such a break would not only jeopardize the fulfillment of the Contract, but also would jeopardize the leaders’ own power.

Therefore, the Republican leadership was confronted with a difficult challenge in the first 100 days of the 104th Congress. They needed to keep their Conference together while moving the most ambitious body of legislation attempted in such a short time span since the Great Depression. As a result, they had to walk a very narrow tightrope between the interests of the more conservative members and the moderates. With the defection of either block, the GOP majority was powerless to pass legislation. Many freshmen didn’t appreciate the distinction drawn by Newt Gingrich years later: “It was true that conservatives had a majority among the House and Senate Republican members, but this was not anything like a majority of the House or Senate. There were about 170 solid conservatives in the House and 46 or so in the Senate, and the fact was the margin of our majority status was made up of partisans who shared our Republicanism but not necessarily our conservatism or our activism.”449 At the time, the freshmen’s attitude was more in line with freshman Lindsey Graham’s (R-SC): “Practicality and revolutions don’t go hand-in-hand. We have been the
conscience of the election. When our leadership get back in the politics as usual mode, we need to say, whoa, wait a minute; that’s not why we got elected.”

The tension between the freshmen unwilling to bend and the leadership needing to bend was evident just below the surface, and came to a head during the debate over the balanced budget amendment. The Contract version of the constitutional amendment mandating a balanced budget included a provision requiring a three-fifths majority to increase revenue, in effect making it harder to address a budget shortfall simply by raising taxes. When this proposal was brought to the floor, it was clear that it would not win enough Democratic votes to reach the two-thirds majority required to pass a constitutional amendment as a result of the three-fifths requirement to raise taxes. A competing proposal, brought to the floor by Rep. Charlie Stenholm (D-TX) during the preceding Congress, did not have the three-fifths provision and had nearly passed the year before. The GOP leadership was then put in a bind; on one hand, forty freshmen were threatening to vote against the amendment without the three-fifths proposal and on the other, a group of moderates were threatening to vote against the amendment if it included it. It soon became clear that without a compromise, there would be no amendment.

The leadership decided that the amendment was too important not to be passed, although the Contract only promised a vote on its planks. They believed that failure to pass the first item of the Contract would destroy their momentum and weaken the new Republican majority irreparably. After postponing the vote for several weeks, the leadership succeeded in bringing the freshmen back into the fold by promising them a separate vote on the three-fifths provision to occur on April 15, 1996. When the amendment came up for final passage, the Stenholm version passed by a vote of 300-132, with all Republicans save two freshmen
supporting it. One of those, Mark Souder of Indiana had some choice words for the leadership, and they showed a keen understanding of the freshmen’s power: “They [the leadership] think we are spoiled children and they would like to spank us. But they know they need us back here to protect their chairmanship and majority. If we freshmen stand together, we can have continued influence.”

Of course, not all freshmen were conservative members. As moderate freshman Steve LaTourette of Ohio said, “I always chafe when I read about the ‘seventy-three Republican freshmen,’ which implies that we are in lockstep all the time or that there is 100 percent agreement. As Republicans in general come in different flavors, so do the freshmen.” However conservative or moderate they were, the freshmen were certainly making a quick impact in Congress.

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As Gingrich had predicted, the hardest votes came near the end of the 100 days when the House considered the last two items of the Contract, term-limits and the tax cut. The term-limits movement had been gaining steam for several years throughout the United States and it was seen by most of the public as a way to force reform in Congress. Over the thirty years before 1995, term limits had never dipped below 47 percent popularity and in the early 1990s was supported by over 80 percent of Americans. Proponents of term limits did not just rely on public popularity to bolster their position. Rather, they argued that the current system, with its incumbency advantage, encouraged the creation career politicians that were increasingly distant from their constituents. They hoped to replace the career politicians with citizen legislators who were more in tune with grassroots democracy.
Nevertheless, term limits seemed almost doomed from the start. Many senior lawmakers in both parties were vehemently opposed to them, claiming that they not only prevented needed expertise to be built up in Congress but also that term limits infringed on the fundamental right of voters to choose who should represent them. Responding to the claim that term limits should pass because the public wanted them, Rep. Bill Emerson (R-MO) said, “I don’t believe the public understands the problems with term limits…We have a very good process in place to limit terms. It’s called elections and it just worked in 1994.” Also presenting a challenge to term-limit advocates was that the GOP leadership did not make the passage of term limits a central part of their legislative goals. Gingrich was lukewarm on the idea and several leaders opposed them outright, including DeLay and Conference Chairman John Boehner. Rep. Henry Hyde, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, the committee that had considered the term limits amendment, was vehemently opposed to term limits, and even spoke out against them on the House floor.

Also presenting problems for the advocates of term limits was the fact that several competing bills were on the floor. The leadership-supported twelve year limit competed with bills calling for six or eight year limits, some with the ability to “sit out” a term and then run again and others that allowed states to set more restrictive limits. The number of bills presented made it hard to rally support around a single proposal.

Eventually, the twelve year limit came the closest to passage, garnering 227 votes, sixty-three votes short of the necessary two-thirds majority. Although the GOP had kept its Contract promise to bring term limits up for a vote, it was the only Contract plank that did not pass the House.
The last item of the Contract to come up for debate was the tax cut bill, which Newt Gingrich called the “crown jewel” of the Contract. The bill called for a 50 percent reduction of the capital gains tax and a $500 per child tax credit for those earning up to $200,000. The capital gains tax cut had long been advocated by Republicans. Backed with support from economists, they argued that reducing the tax would stimulate the economy by promoting maximally beneficial investment activity. Fearing the high taxation that would result from selling an asset, investors may keep it longer than would be most economical to avoid paying the tax. Politically, however, cutting the capital gains taxes are very controversial, because it looks like Congress is giving a tax break to wealthy investors.

The child tax credit also was designed to be a broad-based cut, since Republicans reasoned that a family could more easily pay their taxes if they didn’t have multiple kids to support. Giving a subsidy per child would help offset the costs related to raising children. Nevertheless, the high earnings cap of $200,000 overshadowed these arguments.

The tax cuts were very controversial for several reasons. First, Democratic opponents of the bill charged that Republicans were playing class warfare. “I have heard Speaker Gingrich refer to this tax proposal as the crown jewel of the Republican Contract. I could not agree more. Like the crown jewels, this bill is for royalty, it was for the truly wealthy among us,” said Rep. John Lewis (D-GA). “If you are middle class, if you are poor, you can look but you better not touch.”

Second, the bill was also attacked on the same grounds that the Contract was attacked during the 1994 campaign: that it would explode the deficit and force cuts in programs like Medicare and Social Security. Democrats were responsible for most of these charges, but the bill also was opposed by some Senate Republicans, including Sens. Bob Packwood (R-OR),
the chairman of the Finance Committee, and Pete Domenici (R-NM), the chairman of the Budget Committee. These two senators stressed that cutting taxes would not assist in reducing the deficit, their main priority.

House Republicans countered these arguments by stressing that the proposal would stimulate economic growth by creating jobs, encouraging entrepreneurship, and providing tax savings for the majority of families in the country. Although dissention appeared internally among Republican ranks, especially between those favoring a more modest earnings cap of $95,000 and those who wanted to leave the cap as it was, the leadership put a far higher priority on passing the tax cut legislation than they had on passing term limits, and were able to get dissenters to support the bill with pleas of party unity. On April 5, the 92nd day of the 104th Congress, the tax cut bill was passed 246-188.

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On April 7, 1995, the House Republicans gathered once again on the steps of the Capitol, this time to celebrate the completion of their Contract. In ninety-two days, the Republicans had brought each of their ten planks to a vote in the House of Representatives, passing all but the term limits amendment, something they were quick to cite as winning a simple majority if not the required two-thirds.

Much like the event in September 1994, this event was designed to publicize the success of the House Republicans in passing the Contract, distilled into a motto favored by Gingrich: Promises made, promises kept. The event included speeches by party leaders, satellite feeds for congressmen to conduct local interviews before and after the event, and a video retrospective documenting the formation and implementation of the Contract shown on an 11 ft. by 14 ft. Sony JumboTron. The rally capped off a week of media blitzing by the
Republicans. House Republicans wrote op-ed pieces, did countless television and radio interviews, and planned so-called tarmac rallies to greet congressmen’s planes as they came home to their districts. A USA Today/CNN/Gallup poll taken the first week of April had shown that only half of Americans could describe the Contract, but of those who could, people supported it by nearly a three-to-one margin, 32 percent to 12 percent. The goal was to extend this level of success to the rest of the country.

The Contract’s celebration reached a climax on the night of April 7, when Speaker Gingrich asked the networks for television time for a thirty minute speech broadcasting the successes of the Contract. Gingrich’s move was unprecedented; normally addressing the nation was solely a presidential prerogative. Even more surprising was that Gingrich’s request was granted by CNN and CBS, and was carried live. The speech signaled how much Washington had changed since the beginning of the year, and how much Gingrich had transformed the role of the speaker of the House. President Clinton was not impressed. “To hear him tell it,” he said later, “you would think the Republicans revolutionized America overnight, and in the process changed our form of government to a parliamentary system under which he, as prime minister, set the course of domestic policy, while I, as president, was restricted to handling foreign affairs.”

In a sense, however, Gingrich was right; President Clinton had certainly taken a backseat role as the House drove the government in the first 100 days of 1995, leading congressional expert Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute to comment, “In our adult lifetimes, I don’t think we’ve seen a situation like this where Congress has become the driving branch of government.”

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As President Clinton’s remarks imply, the legacy of the first 100 days of the 104th Congress was hotly debated in the weeks, months, and years after the April ceremony. To hear the House Republicans tell it, the Contract was a great success, radically shifting the direction of the country toward a more prosperous future. They made their promises and then delivered on them quickly, efficiently, and decisively. When voters demanded accountability, they fulfilled their promises, all the while bringing about needed reform in Congress.

To their critics, however, the claimed success of the first 100 days was disingenuous at best and damaging at worst. Asked what he thought was the legacy of those first 100 days on the night Gingrich was to give his speech, Vice President Al Gore responded, “I wouldn’t be proud about cutting school lunches.”

Democrats also charged that the Contract’s terms were a farce. House passage of a bill was a far cry to final enactment of a law, and the Republicans’ breakneck pace had not been matched by the Senate. “If you want to give people credit for passing legislation through one House, Tom Foley should be the Marquis of Spokane, or maybe the Duke,” quipped Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA), one of Gingrich’s fiercest critics.

One thing everyone could agree on, however, was that the House had worked extremely hard in the first 100 days. In fact, during its first three months, the 104th Congress had been in session for 487 hours, nearly 300 more than the 103rd Congress had been during the same period. It was almost four times the average of 123 hours in the previous ten congresses. The 104th had 279 roll call votes in the first three months, compared to 127 for the 103rd and 64 for the average of the past twenty years. 111 measures were passed compared to 87 for the 103rd and 86 for the previous ten congresses. “This is a much
harder working Congress than I’ve ever seen,” said Rep. Carlos Moorhead (R-CA), a thirteen-term veteran.\footnote{462}

Remarkably, the Republicans were able to pass nine of the ten Contract items with an extremely slim majority. The thirteen-vote advantage that the Republicans had in the 104\textsuperscript{th} Congress was nothing when compared to the forty-one vote advantage that the Democrats had in the 103\textsuperscript{rd} Congress. With such a large majority, the Democrats could lose three dozen members and still win without a single Republican vote. Considering the sweeping nature of the legislation in the first 100 days, keeping together such a slim majority was an extremely hard task. As Gingrich later recalled, “We were trying to push through a major reformation of government with a majority of twelve votes. At any moment, a loss of thirteen Republicans could have ended the effort.” In the end, it was truly a testament to the hard work of the leadership that the Republicans were able to stay so unified and pass everything but the term limits amendment.

The achievements of the first 100 days were also accomplished under generally open rules. One of the major gripes the Republicans had while in the minority was that the Democrats rammed legislation through by utilizing closed or modified closed rules almost exclusively. Therefore, the Republicans pledged to debate the Contract under comparatively open rules. During the first 100 days of the 104\textsuperscript{th} Congress, the Republican majority had brought 72 percent of the bills to the floor under open or modified open rules (an open rule allows any germane amendments and a modified open rule allows any germane amendment subject to a time limit on the amendment process or to a requirement that the amendment be printed ahead of time in the \textit{Congressional Record}). Only 28 percent were debated under a modified closed rule (which specifies the specific amendments that may be offered) and none
were brought under a completely closed rule (in which no amendments may be offered). In contrast, during the 103rd Congress, only 44 percent had come to the floor under an open or modified open rule while 47 percent were under a modified closed rule and 9 percent under a closed rule. Nevertheless, some Republicans advocated abandoning their pledge if the passage of the Contract required it. “We are going to make the deadline,” said freshman Republican Mark Souder (R-IN) in early February. “The freshmen are pushing to close the rules in order to pass it [the Contract]. If worse comes to worse, we’ll close the rules at the last minute and ram everything through.” Luckily, Armey’s scheduling of the Contract proceeded without a hitch, and the GOP was never forced to make that decision.

Most important, the first 100 days was notable for the way it changed the terms of debate. As the New York Times wrote, “When the Senate returns from its own recess on April 24, it will confront a stack of legislation already passed by the House that was considered well outside the boundaries of political possibility just six months ago.” Although the celebration of the Contract was unwarranted in relation to the amount of legislation formally enacted during the first three months of 1995, the Contract did serve its purpose to focus the Republican majority and give them a starting point for changing the nation’s direction. The first 100 days had gone off without a hitch, but the second 100 would be more challenging.

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In the days following the Gingrich speech, Clinton strove to regain his initiative. Speaking to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Dallas, Clinton attempted to set a new tone, asserting that he still had an important role to play: “In the first 100 days it fell to the House of Representatives to propose,” he said. “In the next 100 days and beyond, the
president has to lead the quiet, reasoned forces of both parties in both houses to sift through the rhetoric and decide what is really best for America.” “The major purpose of the speech,” noted *The New York Times*, “was to mount a counterattack to the Republicans and to indicate that Mr. Gingrich’s unchallenged moment in the spotlight had come to an end.”

As both sides geared up for the battle over the 1996 federal budget during the early weeks of April, it was clear that the president had the weaker hand. His approval rating, according to a *New York Times*/CBS News poll, was 42 percent in early April and 75 percent of Americans believed that the Republican Congress would have a greater influence over the direction of the country in the next two years, as opposed to 19 percent who thought Clinton would.467 Another poll, taken by the *Washington Post*/ABC News, reported that 49 percent of Americans trust the GOP to do a better job “with the main problems the nation faces over the next few years,” compared with 41 percent who said Clinton would do a better job.468

As the House recessed for three weeks after the completion of the Contract, it seemed that the Republican House had all of the political momentum it would need to continue its revolution. On April 19, however, this momentum was stopped in its tracks when an explosion ripped through the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The attack, which killed 168 people including nineteen children, was at the time the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

The Oklahoma City bombing instantly and dramatically changed the political landscape. President Clinton, able to take on the mantle of mourner-in-chief, led the nation in its struggle to come to grips with the horrible tragedy. In his handling of the bombing, Clinton was able to reestablish himself in the minds of the American people, and it certainly did not hurt that 84 percent if the nation approved of his handling of the crisis, according to a
“He reached America in a way he never had before,” said Clinton pollster Dick Morris. “He spoke for America, expressing our outrage with great power. He spoke as an American president, not as a partisan.”

Cast out of the political shadow, Clinton moved swiftly to regain political relevance with a radically strengthened hand. After bringing back his old political pollster Dick Morris, Clinton would experience an amazing rebirth over the summer and fall of 1995, adopting a policy that has since been labeled “triangulation.” Clinton stressed places where he agreed with the Republican Congress and moved to work with them in politically popular positions, taking credit when the credit was positive. Yet Clinton continued to hold firm in opposing the Republicans when they attempted to significantly cut popular programs, taking advantage of the age-old American tension between the “public’s abstract disdain for Washington and its appetite for programs that directly benefitted them.”

Clinton also benefitted from a House Republican Conference that dramatically overreached, very much in the same way that the president himself had done with his health care plan the year before. In their zeal for significant institutional reform, House leaders forgot pragmatism and politics as they shaped the federal budget over the summer of 1995. Ambitious plans to cut several cabinet-level departments, remake Medicare and Medicaid, cut government spending in nearly all areas (except defense, of course), and effect wholesale reform with one swing of the bat stalled as Clinton promised to veto any attempt to implement these proposals.

The problems for the Republicans did not stem from a lack of unity or drive after the first 100 days. On the contrary, they were as motivated as they had ever been to remake Washington. “The press says…that after the first 100 days our unity will dissolve. But it is
the height of absurdity to suggest that we are going to break apart. We want to show the people that this Congress can work, that we can govern. That desire will hold us together,” said Rep. Chris Shays (R-CT). Shays turned out to be right. At the end of July, even skeptical Democrats were impressed by the way the Republicans were running the House. “I told Dick [Armey],” former Speaker Jim Wright said, “that I sure did disagree with the direction they were taking the country, but I have to take my hat off to them for the assertion of leadership in making the House move and fulfill an agenda.”

Clinton’s growing popularity after the Oklahoma City bombings did not stymie the Republicans either. However, as it became clear that he was more of a player and was willing to use the full powers of the presidency to combat the House Republicans, disagreements sprang up between the two sides over the budget that seemed to be irreconcilable. The Republicans were pushing for $270 billion in Medicare cuts, and the president initially wanted to stand firm against any cuts. However, as his political position grew weaker in the summer of 1995, Clinton agreed to $128 billion in cuts. Although the two sides seemed to be working toward a deal, Gingrich became constrained by the members of his own Conference, especially by the freshmen. As historian Steven Gillon writes, “Any public hint of compromise on the speaker’s part would incur the wrath of his conservative base.” “To tell some of the freshmen they have to come more toward the middle is like telling them they have to shoot their daughters,” said moderate Sherwood Boehlert. Indeed, as White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta noted, Gingrich “was constrained by the politics that he helped to create.”

The climax came in November and then in December, when the federal government shutdown following the breakdown of budget negotiations between the Congress and the
White House. The first shutdown, which began November 14, was accompanied by some extremely bad public relations from the Republican side. After flying on Air Force One to attend the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin in Israel, Gingrich complained that he had shut the government down because Clinton failed to negotiate with him during the long plane ride. “It’s petty, but I think its human,” he said. “You’ve been on a plane for twenty-five hours and nobody talked to you and they ask you to get off the plane by the back ramp...You just wonder, where is their sense of manners? Where is their sense of courtesy?”

Happening on the second day of the shutdown, when public opinion was still malleable, was a disaster for the Republicans. On the next day, the New York Daily News ran a front page cartoon of Gingrich in a diaper with the caption, “Cry Baby.” To make matters worse, the White House released a photo that afternoon of Clinton and Gingrich chatting on the plane. “With one self-indulgent remark,” First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton recalled, “he punctured his credibility and ensured that the American people knew to blame Congress, not the Administration, for the government shutdown.” The first shutdown ended November 19. Although it had wounded the Republicans, Gingrich was still able to force Clinton to agree to a seven-year timeline for a balanced budget, one of the Republicans’ deal breakers.

The first shutdown, however, was only to be followed by another one beginning December 16 after further disagreements brought the process to a standstill. Although Gingrich was worried that a shutdown near the holidays would force him to play the Grinch, the conservatives within his Conference would not budge to compromise. “This is the most defining moment in 30 years in this town, and the question is, is it going to be business as usual, or are we going to do the right thing for our children?” Boehner said. Although the
polls showed that the public wanted to end the shutdown, the Republicans would not budge from their position in the latter weeks of December. “I believe we are in the middle of one of the defining battles of our nation’s history,” Armey wrote his colleagues. “If we don’t see this through and win, we may never get another chance…I believe we are right. I believe the country agrees with us. And I believe we can muster the stamina, the courage, and the resolve to finish this fight and win on our terms.”

Yet as the weeks progressed, it was clear that public sentiment turned against the Republicans, and on January 2, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole convened the Senate and rammed through a bill reopening the government. Seeing no other options, the House followed suit on January 5. Although conservatives within the House GOP Conference advocated continuing the standoff, Gingrich told them the time had come to end the shutdown. Faced with intense anger on the part of some conservatives, Gingrich lashed back, “If you don’t like the way we’re doing it, run for leadership yourself.” On January 6, President Clinton signed the law and the government was reopened.

In subsequent years, the budget battle and the two government shutdowns have been seen as the stalling of the Republicans’ momentum. However, it was not the shutdowns themselves that slowed the Republicans’ revolution. Rather, Clinton learned from the budget battle what it took to win. He understood that the House leadership was being squeezed on both sides and that the ideological inflexibility of many House members could be used to his advantage. Furthermore, he realized that he won because he was seen as reasonable while Gingrich and the GOP were seen as extremists. The decision to meet the Republicans halfway on the Medicare cuts and co-opt their issue rather than just hold the line became the epitome for his future action. Over the next year, he would successfully make the
Republicans’ issues his own and take credit for the Republicans’ willingness to drive the agenda. Ironically, the success of the Republicans would greatly help Clinton in his quest for reelection. Although Clinton began the year trailing by a few points in a hypothetical match-up with the Republican presidential front-runner, Bob Dole, by the time Dole won the nomination in late March, Clinton had built an insurmountable lead. He went on to win a second term in November.
CONCLUSION:

A MIXED LEGACY

Between 1980 and 1995, the Republican Party in the House of Representatives was transformed. At the outset of this era, the House Republicans were a permanent minority, both in the minds of nearly all political observers and, more importantly, in their own minds. Never believing that the GOP would achieve a majority, most House Republicans adopted a go-along-to-get-along attitude with their Democratic colleagues, choosing not to challenge the Democrats’ hold on power in exchange for a small sliver of their own influence.

Over the next decade, the Republican Party would mature into a confrontational minority and take advantage of the Democrats’ weakness in 1994 to run an innovative campaign in which they took control of the House for the first time in four decades. Not content to rest on these laurels, the Republicans would come to Congress in 1995 intending to dramatically change the course of American government, and would move quickly and efficiently to implement their Contract with America. Although by the end of 1995, their revolutionary momentum had been slowed, the Republicans would continue to hold on to majority control for the next twelve years.

The legacy of this era is nearly as complex as describing the era itself, a story with so many facets and confounds that its underlying truths are hard to fully explain. To some, the events described in this thesis constituted a real revolution, not in the same vein as an American or French or Russian Revolution, in which the old order was completely scrapped in favor of a new one, but in the sense that the direction of the government of the United
States was shifted in a decidedly Republican direction. The debates of the 1990s and the 2000s were emphatically on Republican terms.

In the realms of campaigns and elections, policymaking, institutional reform, media strategy, and others, the Republicans induced significant change over the era between 1980 and 1995, and their efforts have had lasting effects on the political system in the United States.

Yet for all their successes, their rise was correlated with regrettable failures. Increasing partisanship has been characteristic in the House since the early 1980s, as Tip O’Neill and the Conservative Opportunity Society sparred with intensely partisan tactics. Furthermore, in the nonstop effort to gain majority control, minorities have more and more turned to legislative obstruction in order to gain a political advantage, gridlocking the political process on the pressing issues facing the country.

**Partisanship**

The maturation of the House Republicans between 1980 and 1995 had lasting implications for the nature of partisanship in Washington. For many decades, Democrats and Republicans had worked together hand in hand in Washington, most notably between Republican presidents and Democratic Congresses. The cooperation between President Eisenhower and the Democratic Congress led by Speaker Sam Rayburn in the 1950s produced some of the most important legislation of the twentieth century, including the Interstate Highway Act. Decades later, President Reagan and Speaker O’Neill had famously cordial relations. “Despite our disagreements in the House, we were always friends after six o’clock and on weekends,” O’Neill later recalled. The friendship between Reagan and
O’Neill was mirrored within the House. “Speaker Tip O’Neill and President Reagan would be competitive and partisan in their business dealings and cordial after hours,” said Rep. Don Sundquist (R-TN), “and the same was true for most of the rest of us. After the House adjourned, everybody was decent to each other and could share a laugh.” In fact, O’Neill and Republican Leader Bob Michel regularly played cards together.

Although partisanship certainly existed in the years before Newt Gingrich and the Conservative Opportunity Society, the COS was the first to embrace it as the most effective strategy to win a majority. In the early 1980s, the House Republicans had no identity as a party, nothing that really brought them together and made them sacrifice personal influence for party advancement. To Gingrich, only a stronger sense of unity would allow them to build the momentum they needed to win control. Partisan tactics, he believed, would provide the catalyst.

Events like Camscam, the disputed Indiana House seat, and Black Thursday convinced Republicans that they would never gain the majority if they did not fight back against what they saw as the despotism of the Democrats. They came to believe Gingrich’s credo, and elected Gingrich to their leadership.

The Democrats, for their part, deserve a fair share of the blame. Their penchant for using closed rules in debate, their decision to respond to COS tactics with their own inflammatory actions, and their willingness to take full advantage of the majority powers of the House to suppress the minority all served to polarize the debate and drive Republicans directly into Gingrich’s hands. What resulted was a vicious circle of partisanship that has spiraled into the situation that exists today.
It would be remiss not to mention that Gingrich’s motives weren’t entirely altruistic. He achieved a great deal of personal power because of the increased polarization of the House. In his own words, he changed the system so much that he was the only man to lead it. One of his fiercest Democratic critics, Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA), a tough partisan himself, once said, “People who dislike the angry, virulent, you’re-no-good tone of American politics should understand Newt Gingrich has had more of a role in bringing that about that anybody else because he was not only one of the earliest practitioners of it, he’s the most successful practitioner of it...Gingrich really decided that the way to get ahead was not to disagree with the opposition, but to delegitimize it, to stigmatize it.”

“Gingrich is the man who is principally responsible for destroying civility in the House of Representatives,” reflected Rep. David Obey (D-WI). “He recruited and trained an entire generation of Republican leaders to divide the public and attack Democrats.”

Gingrich’s long reign of terrorizing the institution of the House paid off for him in the end. Respected political observer Charles Cook said, “In retrospect I firmly believe that the institutional terrorism Gingrich waged against Speakers Tip O’Neill, Jim Wright, and Tom Foley was absolutely critical in his journey to become speaker...Whether you like or dislike Gingrich, whether you agree or disagree with his contract, one thing’s for certain: In a town of overly cautious, timid politicians, he played for keeps, and he played to win. In the end, he did.”

Increased use of partisan tactics and the polarization of the House was one of the most effective ways for Republicans to win back the majority. When Clinton became president, the Republicans’ policy of torpedoing nearly all his major initiatives served their political purposes by not allowing the Democrats to take credit for major legislation. In
November, the voters understandably reacted against a president and a Congress they felt had not kept their promises.

But from a broad-picture point of view, who lost by the Republican decision to unconditionally oppose the Clinton agenda, for example? Would the American people have been better served by a compromise bill that would have done something about health care in America? The Republicans’ decision to place electoral success over compromise perhaps doomed a once in a lifetime change to reform the health care system.

This is where the problem with partisanship lies. It is a fantastic way to motivate your party and build a majority, but it is a lousy way to govern. Policymaking takes a back seat to positioning and reform cannot be realized. Increased amount of polarization in Washington has led to more one-sided policymaking, more unwillingness to compromise, and more gridlock that causes the critical problems faced by the nation to go unaddressed.

**Campaigns and Elections**

In the realm of campaigns and elections, the Republican campaign of 1994 brought revolutionary change. The key to the Republican success—the nationalization of the election—was a strategy actively formulated and employed by the House Republican leadership, and was one that ran counter to the conventional wisdom regarding congressional elections.

As political scientist Gary Jacobson writes, “Until 1994, Democrats were able to maintain House majorities despite Republican dominance of presidential contests by persuading electorates to use different criteria for making presidential choices than for making congressional choices.”

House Democrats had been adept at forging local
majority coalitions, but the diversity of the party did not allow these coalitions to be applied to national elections. The opposite was true for the Republicans. In 1994, however, the Republicans were able to wed the two, framing the campaign around a set of national choices tailored to individual districts.

The Contract with America, signed by 367 House Republican candidates, was central to keeping Republicans on message throughout the country. With a popular agenda of ten issues, the Republicans were able to complement their attacks on the Clinton Administration and successfully nationalize the election based on these proposals and Clinton’s unpopularity. The Contract was run on broad themes, not local issues, and when the Democrats began to attack the Contract, they unwittingly guaranteed that the election would be conducted on the Republicans’ terms. The Contract was also revolutionary in the sense that the document itself was unlike any prior political promise. Designed to harness the people’s desire for accountability, formulated by teams of members, and perfected by polls and focus groups, the Contract was a new and ingenious type of campaign platform.

In years since, nationalization has become the norm in Congressional elections. As Bill Clinton noted, “The nationalization of midterm elections was Newt Gingrich’s major contribution to modern electioneering. From 1994 on, if one party did it and the other didn’t, the side without a national message would sustain unnecessary losses.”

In each of the subsequent midterm elections—1998, 2002, and 2006—the nationalization strategy was employed. 2006 was an especially notable year for the widespread Democratic use of President George W. Bush as a proxy for Republican congressional candidates. The unpopularity of Bush proved to have the same effect as the unpopularity of Clinton in 1994,
as the Democrats regained control of the House and Senate following the November 2006 elections.

The Contract with America, however, has not been copied as closely as the nationalization strategy, neither as a campaign pledge nor as a governing document. Perhaps the shadow cast by the success of the Contract has discouraged further attempts. Also, accountability is no longer the trump issue that is was in the early 1990s.

**Legislation**

The House Republicans’ ability to claim lasting influence through their legislative accomplishments during the first 100 days is questionable. Although the ten Contract items were all brought to a vote within the first 100 days and all passed except the term-limits amendment, the bills ran into considerable slowing in the United States Senate.

Unlike the House of Representatives, the Senate was created by the founders to slow the process of legislation and to mitigate the winds of passionate policymaking to which the House was supposed to be responsive. This purpose was revealed in a famous anecdote, told repeatedly in the Senate literature. Thomas Jefferson, who had not been in the United States during the drafting of the Constitution, asked George Washington what led the future president to accept the idea of a Senate. Washington responded, “Why did you pour that coffee into your saucer?” Jefferson answered, “To cool it.” To which Washington replied, “Even so, we put legislation into the senatorial saucer to cool it.”

The Senate slows legislation by design. Its rules provide for unlimited debate and unlimited amendments. One senator may place an anonymous “hold” on a bill to prevent it from being discussed, a group of forty senators can filibuster a bill indefinitely to kill it, and
the Senate majority leader enjoys nowhere near the House speaker’s power in enforcing party discipline, making party government much harder to implement and speed much harder to induce. As a result, minority party rights are strongly protected in the Senate by virtue of individual rights, and a committed group of minority members can slow legislation to a snail’s pace. Dole presaged these concerns on CBS’s Face the Nation on January 1, 1995: “What happens in the House may be a little different than in the Senate because we have different rules and we can’t push things as quickly as they can in the House.” The difficulty of enforcing party discipline was starkly put into perspective when Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-OR) was the deciding vote that prevented the passage of the balanced budget amendment.

The Senate’s commitment to the Contract was also a factor in their slow consideration of the Contract items. No senator, not even the Republicans, had committed to the Contract; it was fundamentally a House document. On one hand, some senators embraced it. “I think the American people see this as a Republican contract. And quite frankly I see it as a Republican contract and I want to deliver on it even though technically no member of the Senate ever signed this contract,” said Sen. Phil Gramm (R-TX). Yet other members weren’t as enthusiastic to push the Contract through. “The Senate is not going to be rolled over by what appears to be the unrestrained enthusiasm of that other house,” said Sen. John Warner (R-VA). “I don’t think in any way that the people in America look on the Senate as having made a contract with them,” declared Sen. John Chafee (R-RI).

By April 1995, as the House Republicans declared their Contract fulfilled, the Senate had only passed three minor measures and the majority of the major bills like welfare reform and the tax cut bill were facing stiff resistance. The White House and the Democrats were
glad for such a slowing of legislation in the Senate; the fast pace of the House action during the first 100 days gave Democrats no time to organize opposition to the bills. In fact, this had been a strategy pursued by the Republicans to ensure quick and efficient passage. As Gingrich advisor Tony Blankley said, “The Democrats don’t have a chance to organize a national opposition to any issue because they’re coming too fast…the constant rat-a-tat-tat of our bills has put the Democrats in an extraordinarily difficult position where they can’t marshal public support for opposition to any of our bills.”

In the Senate, however, the slow pace of legislation allowed opposition to form, and the fate of the bills languished there for months. Eventually, with several Republican senators running for president (Dole, Gramm, Specter, Lugar), the competition for leadership on issues helped win support for much of the Contract. Even the welfare reform bill passed with strong Democratic support on an 87-12 vote.

By the end of the 104th Congress, of the twenty-one bills, 95 percent passed the House (all but term-limits), 62 percent passed both chambers, 38 percent became law, and 24 percent were vetoed by the president. The most significant Republican victories were welfare reform, the line-item veto, and the reduction of unfunded mandates. However, many other major provisions including the crime bill and the tax cuts were not enacted.

Looking at the legislative record, it is clear that in terms of the numbers of bills enacted into law, the 104th Congress was not especially active during its first year. By the end of 1995, only eighty-eight bills became law, the fewest passed in one session since 1933. The Republicans’ rhetoric about enacting vast change did not pan out immediately.

However, the Republicans’ zeal and unity in continuing the legislative onslaught in the House drove the government and shifted the terms of the political debate decidedly to the
right. Rather than employ the same liberal principles that had dominated American political discourse of the last half century, the Republicans came to Congress determined to redefine the debate, and succeeded in doing so. Writing about the period several years later, political journalist Elizabeth Drew said, “There was to be a war of ideas. Fundamental questions about the role of the federal government would be argued over. Assumptions of the past thirty years—since Lyndon Johnson’s administration, or even since Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal—would be challenged. Budget and spending priorities would be reexamined. The rationale for many programs would be questioned. The powers of the presidency would be challenged on virtually all fronts. It was to be the greatest legislative onslaught on the executive branch in modern history.”

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Responding to the criticism that the 104th Congress was unproductive in its first session, Rep. Tom DeLay asserted:

“The truth is that we were attempting historic change. We were not just passing bills to pave a road or fund a new missile system. We were redefining the way America is governed and making fundamental changes in systems that had been erected over decades. It wasn’t bound to be fast or easy, and we knew we would probably disappoint the Washington pundits who always seem to want immediate, statistically verifiable change to report in their articles. Instead we moved the whole of American governance to the right, and made changes that will shape our grandchildren’s lives. We moved a liberal president to the center…There is little doubt that our work in the 104th Congress shaped American political history for decades to come.”

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Thus, the quantitative record of bills passed is an improper metric. Instead, the qualitative content of the bills changed. Welfare reform became a series of block grants, the balanced budget amendment and the line-item veto put more emphasis on cutting spending to balance the budget, and so on. Even Clinton pollster Dick Morris acknowledged the shift:
“Now the issue was not whether but how to balance the budget, not whether to cut taxes but which ones to cut and by how much.”

Oftentimes in politics the frame in which the debate occurs is more important that the details of the debate itself, since it limits and constrains the arguments. By moving the country rightward, the Republican House was able to ensure its principles were the starting point for future policymaking.

**Relationship between the President and the Congress and Clinton’s Reelection**

The first 100 days of the 104th Congress were also notable for the changing relationship between the president and the Congress. During that period, the House drove the government, and President Clinton took a backseat in the eyes of the public and the press to House Speaker Gingrich. Although swings in the balance of power between the two branches is a regular occurrence in American history, the first 100 days of the 104th Congress signified a time in which the president himself was rivaled for power and authority in Washington, a situation that had not occurred in the twentieth century. In no place was this clearer than in the television networks’ decision to grant Gingrich time to address the nation upon the completion of the Contract with America on April 7, 1995, the first non-president in history to be granted such a request. The president was so irrelevant that Clinton felt the need to assert that “The president is relevant here” in a press conference on April 18.

Although Clinton was later able to use the institutional advantages of the presidency to regain the initiative and reassert control over the news cycle, the ability of Gingrich and the House Republicans to steal the spotlight shows that bold and determined political will can capture the public’s attention.
Paradoxically, Clinton greatly benefitted in the long run from the existence of a Republican Congress. Unlike his first two years in office in which he abandoned nearly all of his moderate proposals in favor of more ardent liberalism, the existence of a Republican Congress pulled Clinton to the right. The Republicans’ willingness to push welfare reform and a balanced budget, for example, gave Clinton the ability to co-opt these popular proposals and make them his own, a role that he played extremely well. His strategy was embodied in the word “triangulation.” As Dick Morris explained, “Triangulate, create a third position, not just in between the old positions of the two parties but above them as well. Identify a new course that accommodates the needs the Republicans address but does it in a way that is uniquely yours.”501

Morris provided Clinton an example relating to the GOP tax cut proposal: “The Democrats say, ‘No tax cuts.’ The Republicans say, ‘Tax cuts for everyone.’ We say, ‘Tax cuts if you are going to college or raising children or buying a first home or saving for retirement.’”502 By following Morris’ proposals and the lead of the GOP Congress, Clinton was able to reposition himself once again as a New Democrat and win reelection in 1996.

**Power of the Speaker of the House**

The assumption of majority control by the Republicans in the 104th Congress also signaled a new period in American history in which the speaker of the House took on a stronger, more powerful role within the House of Representatives itself. Prior to the Gingrich speakership, Democratic House speakers were generally constrained by the strength of the committee system in which each committee chairman controlled a fiefdom of their own power. Democratic speakers would never have dared to take on a committee chairman...
directly or bypass the seniority system, something Gingrich was able to do with impunity. As former Speaker Tom Foley said, “For a Democratic speaker to have done what speaker Gingrich did would have drawn a lot of blood and created a lot of controversy. It would have pitted the speaker not only against that individual committee chairman, but the chairmen in general.”

Having been out of power for forty years, however, Gingrich was working in a situation in which no Republican power bases existed. Additionally, Gingrich had the prestige of a Moses-like figure, having led the Republicans to the promised land of the majority after forty years of wandering in the desert. As a result, the power of the speaker was enhanced, and Gingrich not only exerted extraordinary control over the committee system but also bypassed in when necessary through the formation of the Speaker’s Advisory Panel and a series of task forces appointed by Gingrich to write key legislation under the watchful eye of the party leadership.

In later years, the party leadership would continue to exert significant control over the committee system, especially considering that the limiting of committee chairs’ tenure has prevented the formation of independent power bases. Although Gingrich’s successor Dennis Hastert (R-IL) was seen as a quieter figure, it was clear that the Republican leadership, and not the committee chairs, controlled the House until the GOP lost control in 2006. Current House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) is most definitely in the Gingrich mold; she is a vocal, headstrong, and powerful leader.
Republicans in the 21st Century

“Every revolution begins with the power of an idea and ends when clinging to power is the only idea left,” *Time* opined in October 2006, as the Republican Party was about to lose its majority in the House of Representatives after twelve consecutive years of control. 504

“The Republican Party of 2006 is a tired, cranky shell of the aggressive, reformist movement that was swept into office in 1994 on a wave of positive change,” said Frank Luntz. “I worked for them. They were friends of mine. These Republicans are not those Republicans.” 505

By 2006, the revolutionary zeal of the Republican Party had long since petered out, and the party had come to act just like the Democrats had over their long tenure in control. After George W. Bush became president in 2001, the Republicans adopted high spending habits and had little regard for the values that brought them to control in 1994. For their revolutionary talk about cutting entire departments and revamping the federal budget, the Republicans “made only slight and temporary progress in slowing government growth,” according to Stephen Moore of the Cato Institute. 506

The budget surpluses of the late 1990s, which the Republicans had fought hard to achieve, were turned into deficits within several years. Though the recession in the last year of Clinton’s presidency had a significant impact in creating the deficit, the Bush Administration along with Republicans in Congress did nothing to slow the growth of budget deficits and indeed continued spending. Between fiscal years 2001 and 2005, in fact, federal spending increased 28 percent and nondefense discretionary spending increased 34 percent. 507
The Revolution also petered out in the realm of health care. Whereas in 1995 the Republicans wanted to overhaul the system, convert Medicaid into block grants, and reduce the government’s health spending, in 2003 the GOP Congress enacted a Medicare prescription drug benefit that “added nearly $17 trillion to Medicare’s unfunded liability of $45 trillion.” Even more surprising was the Republicans’ willingness to use the same tactics they decried Democrats for using in the 1980s. In order to get the bill through the House of Representatives, Speaker Hastert, in a move that recalled Jim Wright on Black Thursday, held the vote open for over three hours until enough votes had been secured to win passage.

Just as the voters had acted against the Democrats in 1994, they voted the Republicans out in 2006.

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Thus, the Republican Party between 1980 and 1995 brought revolutionary change to some aspects of Washington and confirmed the status quo of partisan politics in others. Despite the mixed legacy, it is clear that the direction of the country shifted to the right, and the debates of the 1990s and 200s were fought on distinctly Republican terms. “If you look at where Congress was headed,” recalled Kerry Knott, “we were able to head that off and shift in a completely different direction.”

The return of Republicans to the majority after forty years out of power is by itself clearly noteworthy, if not revolutionary. It ended a Democratic monopoly on the House that had been virtually unbroken since 1930. Through depressions, wars, and Republican presidents, the “Berlin Wall of American politics”—Democratic control of the House of Representatives—did not fall until 1994.
In terms of lasting significance, the Republicans revamped the Congress, forcing it to live under its own laws and limited the power and terms of its committee chairs, a reform that the Democrats kept when they regained the majority. The powers of the speaker were enhanced as the Congress shifted to a more centralized structure. The method of electioneering was forever changed, as nationalization of congressional elections is now the norm.

Interestingly, though many of my interview subjects considered the era to be a revolution, they wish that it wasn’t labeled as such. “There’s no question in my mind that I was a part of a revolution,” Bill Paxon told me, “but I wish we didn’t call it that. When you start calling something a revolution, you scare people.” The shutdowns of 1995 and 1996 made these fears a reality and turned much of the public off to further talk of revolutionary change.

Whatever the era was called—whether a revolution or not—the Republicans had an opportunity to make enormous change. They were unified, they faced a weak president, and they had the backing of the public. But they went too far too fast; in their zeal they did not understand that the American people prefer to move slowly and deliberately. Radical change can occur, but step-by-step, something the GOP did not fully understand or appreciate.

“Everyone thought, ‘We’re going to do what Reagan couldn’t do.’ That was the philosophy,” recalled Frank Luntz, lamenting the Republicans’ squandered chance to make further change. “In the end, what they applied was hubris. They could have done so much more if they had been so much more careful.”

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29. Remini, 460.


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36 Balz and Brownstein, 119.
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58 Zelizer, 214.
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