

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

House GOP tussles over new party whip

With the Senate confirmation of Rep. Richard Cheney (R-Wyo.) as secretary of defense, a major tussle has begun among the House GOP to fill the post of Whip, which Cheney vacates.

A prime contender for the post is the pugnacious Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), who launched the campaign to investigate House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Tex.) for alleged violations of the ethics code. Gingrich, a self-described apostle of radical "post-industrial society" policies, believes that the Republicans need a more feisty profile if they are to ever win a House majority.

Two expected contenders for the post, Henry Hyde (Ill.) and Jerry Lewis (Calif.), announced they would not run, with Hyde shifting his support to the fourth contender, Edward Madigan (Ill.). Hyde is mooted as a successor to House Republican Minority Leader Robert Michel (Ill.).

The Gingrich bid for the whip post was launched, with what seems to be considerable support, almost immediately after the announcement of Cheney as defense secretary on March 10. *National Review* guru William F. Buckley called Gingrich's candidacy a "historic opportunity."

Madigan represents the more staid, pragmatic brand of Republican legislator. Representing a farming district, he is billed as a "bridge-builder," capable of mobilizing key Democrats behind legislation.

Republican leaders met to discuss ways to derail the Gingrich challenge, feeling that if Gingrich is elected, there will be a lot of fireworks in the legislature, preventing the "smooth relationship" which the Bush administration is trying to establish with the Democratic-controlled Congress.

Pentagon advances new ASAT weapon proposal

In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee on March 15, the Pentagon renewed its efforts to win support for an anti-satellite missile system capable of attacking low-orbiting Soviet spacecraft which it hopes to have ready by the mid-1990s.

The ASAT missile could be placed aboard ships or on land. "The United States desperately needs a capable ASAT," said Gen. John Piotrowski, commander of the U.S. Space Command, "to deter Soviet aggression in space and on Earth, and to destroy Soviet satellites that target our forces should deterrence fail."

Congress, in a series of bitter fights, effectively killed the Pentagon's previous ASAT weapon by prohibiting the department from testing it against targets in space. The new ASAT effort, which includes longer-term research on laser beam weapons, is a joint-service project.

Prospects for the new program are much better than previously, according to William Dickinson (R-Ala.), the ranking committee Republican. But some lawmakers are "totally dedicated to blinding the United States," he said, and vehemently oppose ASATs on the grounds that the United States is too dependent on military satellites and has more to lose from an ASAT race.

Rep. Ron Dellums (D-Calif.), who chairs the R&D subcommittee, attacked the Pentagon for not letting Congress know before transferring \$15 million from other projects in order to upgrade a New Mexico laser that has the ability to damage satellites. Frank Kendall, the acting deputy undersecretary of defense, said the upgraded Mid-Infrared Advanced Chemical Laser (MIRACL) would be used pri-

marily for research, but conceded that it may be able to eliminate some satellites in a crisis.

House bill demands Bush resolve Eastern strike

Legislation forcing President Bush to appoint an emergency board to help resolve the Eastern Airlines strike cleared the House on March 15, but supporters fell short of the two-thirds margin needed to override a threatened White House veto.

The bill would give the President one day to name members to a board which would investigate the problems and offer recommendations to end the dispute. During the 21-26 days the board would have to do its work, Eastern would have to pay employees pre-strike wages. The bill would also require that the panel address terms for new contracts between Eastern and its pilots' and flight attendants' unions. The 252 to 167 vote in support of the proposal was mainly along party lines.

Skepticism greets Bush's S&L plan

The Bush Plan to deal with the savings and loan crisis has met with some skepticism on Capitol Hill. Even Republicans are not quite sure that the plan would not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Sen. Connie Mack (R-Fla.) commented on March 15 in floor debate that the plan, "although promising, is complex and its ultimate effects on the savings and loan industry are still a matter of much debate." The big question, continued Mack, was whether the plan would allow the savings and

loan institutions to remain profitable, thus maintaining their key role in providing credit to prospective homeowners.

"It may be true," said Mack, "that financial market developments are rendering much of the current S&L industry obsolete. But should federal policy be implemented so that the demise of a major industry is expedited? Could this reduce the availability of housing credit in the future?" If Mack's comments are any indication, the Bush plan will meet with considerable opposition as the bill is passed to the Congress for legislation.

Ethics probe of House Speaker continues

On March 15, House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Tex.) announced that he would not seek another term as speaker if most of his Democratic colleagues feel that a pending ethics report is so damaging that he should not remain in his leadership post.

"I don't have to be speaker," Wright said in a press conference at his Capitol Hill office. "I don't have to run again. If I was convinced in my mind that most of my colleagues didn't want me to be speaker, I wouldn't run again. I'd serve out my term as effectively as I can." Wright reiterated that he was confident that the Standards of Official Conduct panel will find he has not broken any House rules. "If someone said I was guilty of poor judgment in one or two cases, I'd agree, I'd accept it," he added.

Wright is following advice to accept contritely any adverse findings which the panel is expected to present, thus lessening the chance of a rebellion in House Democratic ranks.

Although offering to resign if there were a vote of no confidence by fellow Democrats, he seems confident that the Democrats will stand behind him in what is regarded as a partisan attack by House Republicans. "They are for me," Wright said. "After this is resolved, I'll be stronger than ever."

Some Democrats have been less than enthusiastic in their support of the speaker. One Democrat commented to the *Washington Post*, "It's a conflicting response. The speaker's defenders say they are going to hunker down, that this is partisan. The other side is saying some of this stuff is potentially indictable. . . . This is a fishing expedition that caught a . . . whale." Wright opponent Mickey Edwards (R-Okla.) thinks that the speaker's comments about his resignation indicate that "he senses he's in real trouble."

Conservative House Republicans, led by Georgia's Newt Gingrich, have been pressing for release of the 450-page report on Wright by panel counsel Richard Phelan. House Majority Leader Thomas Foley (D-Wa.) said that such disclosure would be "unprecedented and wholly improper."

Baker courts Dems on Central America plan

The Bush administration, through Secretary of State James Baker, is following Teddy Roosevelt in "speaking softly" to the Democratic Congress, but it is undoubtedly the Dems who are "carrying the big stick" with the potential to foul up any plans the administration may have. Baker has been attempting to woo temperamental Democrats into supporting a new initiative in Central America.

Baker is letting key Democrats

look at secret details of the new policy, which seeks to maintain the Nicaraguan guerrillas in border camps in Honduras at least through February 1990. In return, Democrats have promised that they will not disclose details of the plan or criticize it before it is announced. Baker has revealed some of the "carrots and sticks" the administration intends to use to prod the Sandinistas to hold elections, release political prisoners, and guarantee civil liberties in Nicaragua.

Some congressional Democrats appear to welcome the opportunity to shape policy through private consultations with Baker. "It is nice to sit down with an administration official on this issue and not be considered an enemy of your own country," said Rep. David Obey (D-Wisc.).

But the Baker charm offensive may not lead to a lasting romance. Some liberal Democrats say they will not be "intoxicated" by the administration's overtures. They say that Baker is trying to stampede them into support for a policy whose details are murky, and they are unsure whether Bush is committed to a diplomatic rather than a military solution to the region's conflicts.

House panel endorses base closings

On March 15, the House Armed Services Committee voted overwhelmingly in support of a proposal to close, reduce operations, or change the mission at 145 military facilities. The issue is not entirely decided, since members who oppose the recommendations are expected to exercise their right to force a full House vote on the closings.