

103rd Congress: no cakewalk for Clinton

by William Jones

As the euphoria among the Democrats over the defeat of George Bush dissipates and the dust starts to settle, one of the major questions facing the new Clinton-Gore regime will be the relationship between the White House and the Congress, a relationship which has been one of continual warfare during most of the four years of the Bush presidency. Bill Clinton has promised an end to the "cold war" between the two branches. Perhaps he spoke too soon, or maybe it's just a bit of wishful thinking, because there is much in the new Congress which should serve to dampen hopes of a frictionless administration.

The 103rd Congress will truly be a "new" Congress, with 110 new members in the House and 11 in the Senate. It was obvious early on in the campaign that there would be no "coattails" to a Clinton victory. Although the electorate was eager to replace Bush, much of the anti-incumbent ire was bipartisan in nature, directed at incumbent members of Congress as well. The Democrats easily maintained their majority in the Senate, although two runoffs are still to be decided in special elections. If both Sens. Wyche Fowler (D-Ga.) and Kent Conrad (D-Neb.) win reelection, the Democrats can add one additional vote to their present majority. In the House, the Republicans made gains, increasing their contingent by nine additional seats, although the Democrats retain an 84-member advantage.

It was surprising that there wasn't a bigger turnover than actually occurred. For some incumbents, like House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), the real fight occurred in the primaries. But even the Democrats, just prior to the election, were predicting greater losses than they received. Turnover was expected to be as high as 150 members or more, rather than the actual 121. Although Democrats still have the majority they need to pass legislation crafted by a Clinton administration, they now have a few more maverick Republicans to contend with, who could create problems for initiatives from the White House. Neither did the Democrats succeed in getting their veto-proof majority in the Senate, which some optimists had been hoping for.

Demographic shifts

One striking aspect of the 103rd Congress is the greater representation of minorities. Apart from the 48 women, there are now 13 new black congressmen, raising the strength of the Black Caucus to 39, a big increase in their political muscle. One new black congressman, Alcee Hastings (D-Fla.),

had been impeached by the Senate after being cleared in a criminal court proceeding for charges of bribery and conspiracy. There are also more Hispanics in the Congress, bringing their number to 19. Since these groups generally represent impoverished districts, they tend to be more oriented toward the basic economic issues, and a bit less excited about a radical environmentalist or "New Age" agenda.

Many are viewing the fact that there are fewer lawyers in the Class of 1992 as an encouraging sign. The law degree, especially from Yale or Harvard, is often a *sine qua non* for advancement in Washington's political elite. In contrast, the freshman class consists of a good number of people with backgrounds in education and business. The new crop is relatively young, with half the new members under 45 years of age, although this figure tends to understate their level of political experience. Some 72% of the freshmen have previously held elected office.

There will also be major changes in the composition of the committees, the bastions of political power on Capitol Hill. Almost half of the seats on the House Foreign Affairs Committee will be up for grabs. Even on the all-powerful House Appropriations Committee, the keepers of the purse, there are 19 vacancies to be filled, including two subcommittee chairmanships. The committee chairmanship is being contested, with the 82-year-old Jamie Whitten (D-Miss.) (who is not in good health) refusing to give up his chair to the next in command, 83-year-old William Natcher (D-Ky.), despite pressure from the Democratic leadership.

'New Age' agenda?

More interesting perhaps is how Democratic legislators will react to Clinton legislation, especially if it has a radical environmentalist or "New Age" tinge to it. Granted, many freshmen were swept to power on the codeword "change," but how this will be interpreted by the various legislators remains to be seen.

The "old guard" is concerned over the possible outlines of Clinton policy. In discussions with Clinton in Little Rock, Arkansas on Nov. 15, Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Me.) tried to play down the idea of a "100 days program," a Clinton theme playing on the images of the first days of the Kennedy and Reagan administrations. Both Mitchell and House Speaker Tom Foley (D-Wash.) warned against unfounded hopes that anything definitive could be accomplished in that time frame.

Shortly thereafter, when Clinton indicated that he was going to carry through on his promise of allowing gays in the military, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), mooted as a possible member of the Clinton cabinet, voiced strong objections. Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.) called it an issue that could "blow the lid off the Capitol." If Clinton attempts to propitiate the New Age liberal-left wing of the Democratic Party, it could be rough going for his legislative agenda.