

Newt's 'power rangers' start to stumble

by William Jones

Hardly a week has passed since King Newt's entry into Washington on Jan. 4 under the banner of the Conservative Revolution, and already storm clouds have appeared on the horizon for the "new regime." Everything was done to underline the triumphal nature of the Republican takeover of both houses of Congress for the first time since the 1950s, including inviting members of the inane children's television show, the *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* (whose "power" comes from the invocation of dinosaurs), to entertain the members' youngsters during opening day. This underlined the New Age self-image House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and his Conservative Revolution comrades want to project.

The first week of hearings on Capitol Hill gave some of the Conservative Revolution advocates a taste of the public opprobrium that awaits their agenda. Their biggest problem is how to carry out the "Contract with America" plan for dismantling most of the federal government, without being seen as a gang of brutes out of the seamiest pages of a Charles Dickens novel, or without being exposed as totally dishonest in hiding from voters the pain their agenda will inflict.

In a rare moment of candor on "Meet the Press" on Jan. 8, House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Tex.), revealed that the new House leadership also views its own members as better off kept in the dark, like the voters. "The fact of the matter is," said Armey, "that once members of Congress know exactly, chapter and verse, the pain that the government must live with in order to get to a balanced government, their knees will buckle."

Resistance

The lynchpin of the insurgent Republicans' "Contract with America," is the proposed amendment to the Constitution which would require a federal "balanced budget." Dem-

ocrats are insisting, rightly, that the Republicans be specific about the cuts they plan to inflict in order to fulfill such a mandate. The governor of Vermont, head of the national governors' association, has prepared a state-by-state report on the cost of this austerity recipe. Even the *Wall Street Journal* is running columns denouncing proponents of the balanced-budget amendment for "evasion" and "posturing." Others (see story, p. 52), point out that such an amendment is a frontal assault on the Constitution itself.

Appearing on Jan. 9 opposite Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.), who said that he would support efforts to cut \$450 billion out of next year's budget, House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.) made the obvious observation about such lunacy: "We're never going to balance the budget unless the economy continues to work well, unless you have people at work making good wages. That's why we make such a big deal about the fact that people have to earn a good living." He continued, "You're never going to cut your way to a balanced budget."

Majority Leader Armey, going in the opposite direction, even wants to wipe out the minimum wage.

With a clear Republican majority on the House Judiciary Committee, chaired by fervid budget-cutter Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), the balanced-budget amendment slid through committee on a party-line vote after having warded off the numerous amendments offered by Democrats on the committee, including one that would have exempted Social Security from the budget balancing strictures. Within the House as a whole, however, there is concern about the amendment's provision which would require a three-fifths majority to raise taxes. Moderate Republicans pleaded in vain with Armey to eliminate this clinker. If it is maintained, the bill itself could fail.

On the Senate side, the Judiciary Committee had to postpone action on the balanced budget amendment, since the

Republicans did not even have enough committee votes to bring the measure to the floor.

Gingrich 'reforms'

On the first day of the new Congress, Gephardt passed the House gavel to Speaker Newt, and the normally abrasive Gingrich bent over backwards to say nice things about FDR and Democrats. The legislators proceeded, until the wee hours of the next morning, to pass the eight major House reform items that Gingrich had outlined in his "Contract with America": truth-in-budgeting baseline reform, term limits for the Speaker and committee and subcommittee chairmen, a ban on proxy voting, opening committee hearings to the public and press, a three-fifths vote to approve tax increases, a comprehensive House audit, applying anti-discrimination and workplace safety rules to Congress, and 23 other House rule changes.

The aura of amiability lasted only an hour or so into the session, when Democrats began blasting parts of the proposed legislation. In particular, they went after the Republican proposal to change the House rules to require a three-fifths vote—a super-majority—in order to raise federal taxes. The measure is downright unconstitutional.

Already Gingrich has had to retreat on a number of issues he had earlier championed. A Republican proposal on welfare reform which includes a measure that would deny benefits to legal immigrants who have not become citizens and which Gingrich had supported, became too hot to handle. Gingrich reversed himself on Jan. 10, insisting that he was "very pro-legal immigration," and saying that the Congress was going to have to "revisit the question of eliminating legal aliens from ever getting access to government services after some length of time of being here and paying taxes."

An item which received less attention in the first day's legislation, but which has great potential for building up one facet of the federal government which the Conservative Revolutionaries don't appear to reject—the growth of police-state powers—is the extensive House audit mandated by the Republicans. Knowing Gingrich's history of using such investigations as a tool to "purge" opponents, as he did with Speaker Jim Wright, it is clear that a House audit would be an important tool in the hands of the House Republican leadership to frame up their Democratic opponents, or any nonconformist in their own ranks.

Much of the first day's floor debate focused on the \$4.5 million advance that Gingrich had been offered by Rupert Murdoch's Harper-Collins publishing firm for two books he was to write. Gingrich had been forced to back off from the advance as a result of the heat. David Bonior (D-Mich.), the House Minority Whip, proposed to limit book royalties for congressmen to one-third of a member's annual salary. Democrats also forced a procedural vote in order to state their support for an outright ban on gifts from lobbyists, forcing angry Republicans to vote against it. Demanding various

reform measures to limit the influence of "special interests," Democrats were able to drape themselves in some of the fashionable "reformer" garb.

A potentially far more effective tack, though, was taken by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), who held his Senate seat against a Conservative Revolution challenge in November. Speaking at the National Press Club on Jan. 11, Kennedy pointed out that the Republicans had won the election "by the narrowest of margins," and ascribed his own victory to the fact that he ran for health reform, for a minimum-wage increase, for jobs, and against limiting welfare benefits and "other harsh proposals that aim at the mother but hit and hurt innocent children," as spelled out in the "Contract with America." Kennedy urged Democrats "to prove to working families and average citizens that we are on their side fighting hard for them," rather than adapting to the GOP agenda.

The Senate's opening day followed the choreography of the Conservative Revolution—although with far less gusto than in the House, and adjourning after a few hours. "We will roll back federal programs, laws, and regulations from A to Z—from Amtrak to zoological studies," warned Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.), "working our way through the alphabet soup of government."

Tyrannosaurus Rex

Gingrich and his "power rangers" claim to have a mandate from the people to take a meat-ax to federal spending, and have shown a determination to go after every major social and medical program on the books, except, at least for the time being, Social Security. In the Capitol's corridors, even Social Security is being discussed as a potential target of the Republican "mandate."

Although Newt and the boys conferred with Conservative Revolution stalwarts in the states like Michigan's Gov. John Engler and Wisconsin's Tommy Thompson, the balanced budget amendment is upsetting to the nation's governors, since it would eliminate most of the federal funding they rely on to make ends meet. The Republicans are trying to reassure governors by promising to pass legislation relieving the states of "unfunded mandates," i.e., payments which the states are mandated by the federal government to meet, but for which money is not provided. The insurgents have been adept at mobilizing support for this by manipulating popular discontent with the many oppressive environmental restrictions imposed on the states by the Environmental Protection Agency. Those populists who fall for this "anti-government" ploy will be cutting off their nose to spite their face. Even National Conference of State Legislatures calculations show that the bulk of the mandates consists of items such as expanding the Social Security system to state and local employees not yet participating in a retirement system, increasing the Medicare wage cap from \$54,300 to \$125,000, and changing the eligibility requirement of various Medicare and Medicaid programs.