

# GOP collapse speeds up in wake of election

by Carl Osgood

On Oct. 6, during House floor debate, David McIntosh (R-Ind.), the leader of the approximately 40-member Conservative Action Team, complained that the likelihood that the omnibus spending bill would be “coming out in a way that the Republicans, conservative Republicans in particular, can be proud about, is very nil.” While he blamed President Clinton, his anger toward the House GOP leadership exploded in the wake of the Nov. 3 mid-term elections, in which the GOP lost five seats in the House and gained no seats in the Senate. Much of that anger was directed at House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), who had predicted only weeks before the election that the Republicans would pick up as many as 50 seats. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) had been looking for a 60-vote, filibuster-proof majority there.

In the days after the election, the news media were full of stories of recriminations within the House and Senate Republican caucuses over who was to blame for the debacle. The week ended with Steve Largent (R-Okla.) challenging Dick Armey (R-Tex.) for the House Majority Leader post, followed a few hours later by House Appropriations Committee Chairman Bob Livingston (R-La.) challenging Gingrich for the Speaker’s chair. Gingrich then unexpectedly decided to step down as Speaker.

The turmoil extends to much of the rest of the leadership as well. Also taking heat are GOP Conference chairman John Boehner (R-Ohio) and GOP Congressional Campaign Committee chairman John Linder (R-Ga.). Boehner is being challenged by George Radanovich (R-Calif.) and J.C. Watts (R-Okla.). Linder, a Gingrich ally, has received much of the blame for the GOP’s loss of seats. He is being challenged by Tom Davis (R-Va.), who has the support of Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Tex.), the only member of the leadership who seems to be escaping unscathed. Also jumping into the fray, is conference vice-chair Jennifer Dunn (R-Wash.), who announced a few days after Largent that she would run for Majority Leader. Dunn is viewed as more moderate than Largent, who came in with the GOP takeover in 1994. Chris Cox (R-Calif.), currently Republican Policy Committee chairman, contemplated his own run for Speaker, but withdrew a few days after announcing. The outcome of these contests will be decided in the leadership elections set for Nov. 18.

Livingston has set himself the task of unifying the GOP caucus and working with Democrats to pass legislation. Unifying the fractious GOP conference is likely to be the bigger

of the two challenges, however. McIntosh calls Livingston “an old-style pork caucus kind of guy who could lead us back to minority.” He explained to NBC’s Tim Russert on Nov. 8 that the letter Livingston sent to Gingrich immediately after the election, in which he suggested that Gingrich ought to step down, “indicates he was looking for a lot of power, and what we need is somebody who isn’t looking for power for themselves, but looking out for the broad conference.” McIntosh and the radical conservatives may also be worried that Livingston may be too willing to compromise with Democrats and the Clinton administration, a propensity he demonstrated as Appropriations Committee chairman over the last three years. While Livingston played a central role in the government shutdowns of 1995-96, he has since gained a reputation for pragmatism, often opposing controversial riders in order to get bills passed. Otherwise, he is as much of a budget-cutter as the rest of them.

The Senate GOP caucus shows fewer signs of turmoil. No challenge has emerged to Lott, or to other members of the leadership. Potential threats to Lott are said to be Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) and Majority Whip Don Nickles (R-Okla.), although Hagel is expected to challenge Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) as chairman of the GOP Senatorial Campaign Committee, and Nickles is expected to run for his current position. The only dramatic change so far, is the certain elevation of Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) to chair the Banking Committee, in the wake of the defeat of Al D’Amato (R-N.Y.) by Rep. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.). The Nov. 5 *Wall Street Journal* fretted that Gramm has been opposing the compromises which D’Amato was making in order to repeal the Depression-era Glass-Steagall Act, and that Gramm’s takeover “threatens the fragile coalition that Senator D’Amato had assembled.”

## The ‘Third Way’ danger

Democrats, on the other hand, have been re-energized by their unexpected successes. They anticipate that their agenda, which the Republicans stalled in the 105th Congress, including a Patients’ Bill of Rights, saving Social Security, improving public education, and some sort of tobacco-control measure, has a better chance in the 106th Congress. House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.), in talk show appearances after the election, said, “I’m going to work very hard to see if we can find Republicans to join with Democrats to get these things done.”

However, Democrats should not think that they will be able to capture a Congressional majority and retain the White House in 2000, under the stewardship of the “Third Way” Democratic Leadership Council. The divide between the DLC and the traditional Roosevelt constituencies of organized labor and minorities came out into the open during a DLC press briefing on Nov. 4, when Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) acknowledged that the DLC was going to continue to support a trade policy which is opposed by the majority of the Democratic base, including the AFL-CIO.