

Clinton gets serious about taking on GOP Jacobins

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Reports of President Bill Clinton's political death, in the words of Mark Twain, "have been greatly exaggerated." Despite the best efforts of Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.), and House Majority Leader Rep. Richard Arney (R-Tex.)—the Republicans' three leading self-proclaimed congressional Jacobins—the "Contract with America" is not steamrolling through Congress, President Clinton is not a lame duck, and a GOP candidate is hardly a shoo-in to take the presidency in 1996.

On the contrary, as even the London *Economist* recently admitted, the Democrats, led by the President, are beginning to fight back against the most egregious features of the GOP "Contract," and the President has vowed to use his most powerful weapon—the veto—to cut the Republican congressional majority down to size.

One of the sharpest confrontations to date took place on Feb. 23, when the President met with the 204 House Democrats on Capitol Hill. He assailed the Republican plan to shut down the school lunch program, which provides nutritious meals to 25 million schoolchildren, and to replace it with block grants at significantly lower funding levels to the states, which funds would not even have to be used exclusively to provide food. The elimination of the national school lunch program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, according to an analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, would cut \$7 billion in assistance over the next five years.

President Clinton, who has so far not announced whether he will veto the bill if it reaches his desk, called on the GOP to think twice about going ahead with trashing the program. "Here's a program that isn't broke, that's done a world of good for millions and millions of children of all races and backgrounds all across our country, and I think it would be a

terrible mistake to put an end to it, to gut it, to undermine it," he said.

When Speaker Gingrich showed up at the Capitol for his morning press session on Feb. 23, he was grilled by reporters who accused him of stealing food off the plates of poor children to finance the capital gains tax cut for the wealthiest 10% of the population. The usually calm and collected Speaker briefly lost his composure, stammering about the Republicans' budget-slashing plan, "I'm talking about the overall, the overall."

Acting Agriculture Secretary Richard E. Rominger has been even more blunt than the President in his attack on the food program cuts. "The general reduction in nutrition assistance for children could lead to increased malnutrition, growth stunting, and iron deficiency anemia, which can permanently reduce intelligence," he said.

Given that some of the more rabid Conservative Revolution ideologues, such as Britain's Lord William Rees-Mogg, are now openly calling for the abolition of public education and the relegating of 95% of the population to menial labor at peasant wages, it is not unreasonable to ask whether the permanent reduction of intelligence through childhood malnutrition is an unspoken goal of the "Contract's" intellectual authors at the Heritage Foundation and the Mont Pelerin Society.

Defending organized labor

Another sign of a comeback by the administration was visible on Feb. 21, when Vice President Al Gore announced that the President would soon issue an executive order barring federal agencies from contracting with private firms that permanently hire strike-breakers. Gore and Labor Secretary Robert Reich attended the annual board meeting of the AFL-CIO in Bal Harbor, Florida, and delivered a promise from

President Clinton that he would veto three other "Contract" bills that would repeal the Davis-Bacon Act and other fair-wage laws.

The GOP had planned to introduce a bill allowing government contracts to go to firms violating the strike-breaking proviso, and Speaker Gingrich immediately screamed "foul" when he learned about the pending executive order.

These moves by the White House prompted *Roll Call*, a daily newspaper on Capitol Hill, to report that the President's popularity is back on the rise because voters see him "fighting for things he believes in." The paper cited Clinton's commitment to put 100,000 more police on the streets, student loans, a minimum wage hike, and exemption of Medicare from the budget axe as some of the programs that voters were citing as evidence that the President is strongly "staking out a position."

Scandals taking a beating

Another front on which the President's fortunes have taken a turn for the better is Whitewater. On Feb. 22, the *Wall Street Journal* published a front-page story under the headline "There May Be Less To Whitewater Case Than Meets the Eye," admitting that many of the most juicy allegations against the First Family are turning out to be dead ends after months of intense investigation.

"As independent counsel Kenneth Starr moves ahead with his investigation and refines his legal case, what is most noteworthy is how many of the biggest Whitewater headlines appear to be heading toward the cutting room floor," the paper commented.

"In fact, in what may be Washington's biggest open secret, few of the Beltway cognoscenti or the hundreds of journalists following the affair believe it ultimately will ensnare the Clintons in criminal charges."

The *Wall Street Journal* quoted Rep. Jim Leach (R-Iowa), the new chairman of the House Banking Committee and a key player in the congressional Republican efforts to keep the Whitewater story in the headlines throughout 1994, admitting: "I have viewed it largely as an issue of public ethics. I'm suggesting that there is no reason to pursue criminal accountability with the Clintons."

If the *Journal* story is accurate, the nine areas of investigation pursued by Robert Fiske and his successor, Kenneth Starr, have all failed to turn up any evidence of criminal misconduct by the President, the First Lady, or any of their top aides.

At the same time that the Clintons are being apparently exonerated after two years of British-orchestrated black propaganda around Whitewater, etc., some of the leading Republicans in Congress are not faring so well. On Feb. 23, the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct (the so-called Ethics Committee) opened its formal investigation into Speaker of the House Gingrich. Two separate complaints have been filed against Gingrich, charging that his university course in American history was a conduit for under-the-table

campaign contributions. One complaint focuses on GOPAC, the political entity that Gingrich has run for several years and which collected funds to distribute his televised courses.

The other complaint, filed in early February by three Democratic members of Congress, charges that Gingrich received between \$150,000 and \$200,000 worth of free air time from Jones Intercable, one of the nation's largest cable TV operators. Jones Intercable owns Mind Extension University, which televises college courses, and they provided Gingrich with 20 hours of free air time into its 26 million home market. Jones Intercable has a number of regulatory issues pending before Congress.

The ethics panel is also expected to probe the book deal that Gingrich signed with a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., on the basis of similar possible conflicts of interest.

Another possible target of the ethics panel is Senator Gramm, who formally announced his candidacy for the Republican Party presidential nomination on Feb. 24. At a fundraising event the night before his announcement, Gramm raised \$4.1 million in contributions. He still has several million dollars left from his 1990 Senate reelection campaign that he will be permitted to use in his presidential bid.

However, Gramm has been accused of conducting fundraising from his Senate office, and he has admitted doing this. Under congressional ethics rules, such activity is forbidden.

On Feb. 17, the *Wall Street Journal* published a profile of Gramm's fundraising machine which revealed, among other things, that his wife, Wendy Lee Gramm, who headed the Commodities Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) under both Presidents Reagan and Bush, had been raising funds for his 1990 campaign from corporations and individuals who had regulatory matters pending before the CFTC. The *Dallas Morning News* recently published a copy of a Gramm campaign memo from 1989 discussing ways to "exploit" Mrs. Gramm's government post to build the senator's financial base in the business community. The *Journal* reported that over \$1.4 million was raised in that campaign from companies regulated by the CFTC.

Senator Gramm has hired a gun-toting, former Texas police officer, Duke Bodisch, to develop dirt on his Republican opponents. Gramm is known even among his GOP colleagues as one of the most mean-spirited politicians in Washington. (He once told a dinner audience, "I have a heart. I keep it in a quart jar on my desk.") His presidential campaign has already received the de facto backing of the British intelligence-run Hollinger Corp.'s media empire, including a fawning article about his candidacy by David Frum, an editor of the Hollinger-dominated *American Spectator*, which appeared recently in *Atlantic Monthly*.

When Gramm sets his sights on his two leading rivals, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.) and former Tennessee governor and Bush education secretary Lamar Alexander, blood will likely be drawn.