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227. 1986

CHICAGO TRIBUNE MAG 10-5-86

Majority ruler

The 'new' Sen. Bob Dole seems a little less caustic, a little more conservative — and, he hopes, a lot more likely to become the next president

Article by Dorothy Collin
Photos by Paul F. Gero

Robert Dole, the majority leader of the United States Senate, was having fun as he warmed up his audience of Cook County Republicans at a luncheon fundraiser in the Palmer House last summer. The 63-year-old Republican from Kansas, who would like very much to be president, was telling one of his favorite stories, an anecdote that showcases two of his most attractive assets: his self-deprecating wit and his wife, Elizabeth, the secretary of transportation.

When Elizabeth Dole was nominated for the Cabinet post by President Reagan, the senator recalled, "it created a lot of excitement around our house. There were a lot of stories written, a lot of pictures taken. I was always in the picture, but I was never identified. They just said 'the man on her left is her husband.' People magazine took an interest and came down to Washington and followed us around and by actual count took about 300 pictures. They wound up using three, and one showed us making the bed.

"That brought a hot letter from this guy out in California whose wife had read the story, and he was now helping make the bed. He said, 'Senator, I don't mind your wife getting the job, she's well-qualified. But you've got to stop showing off around the house. You're causing men problems all across this country.' And I wrote back: 'Buster, you don't know the half of it. The only reason she was helping was because they were taking pictures.' "

As the man who runs the Senate, Dole is one of the two or three most powerful men in Washington. In addition to setting the agenda for the Senate, thus controlling what is and is not considered, he deals with the White House, with the House of Representatives and its leaders, and with the egos and ambitions of his 52 Republican and 47 Democratic colleagues. One reason the senator

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The senator would like to make the whole nation "Dole country."

was at the Chicago luncheon was to drum up support for Republican candidates as the GOP fights to keep control of the Senate after the November elections. Another was to present the Bob Dole of 1986 to a group that could have clout in 1988 in a key presidential primary state.

Today's Bob Dole is a complex man. Deservedly famous for his flashing wit, he can be charming, generous, even playful. But through the years he also has gained a reputation for a slashing toughness that at times crossed into meanness. A handsome figure of natural grace and elegance, he grew up poor[1] on the Kansas flatlands and every day he must struggle to button his shirt because of injuries suffered in World War II. Fiercely competitive and combative, he revels in being the leader, in standing his ground and fending off challenges. Yet he also is patient, compassionate and, beneath the competent, confident surface, perhaps even vulnerable.

The hard side of Bob Dole, majority leader, could be seen one long steamy night last summer when the Senate's tradition of comity and civility nearly vaporized in partisan heat generated by debate over sanctions against the white government of South Africa, aid to the "contra" rebels fighting the Sandinista government of Nicaragua and just who was in control of the Senate, anyway.

When Democrats, led by Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and Minority Leader Robert Byrd of West Virginia, accused Dole of unfairly blocking their efforts and dictating to the Senate, tempers rose and charges flew. Finally, after more than an hour of increasingly strong exchanges, Dole, with a voice and face like dark granite, declared, "I do not intend to be intimidated by

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anyone in the Senate." Ending the dispute, at least publicly, he told his colleagues, "I did not become majority leader to lose."

The softer side of Dole was evident one sunny morning as he rode through the wheat fields near his hometown of Russell, Kan., the quintessential place to come from. He was recalling the years when he was the county attorney, before he was elected to the House and then the Senate, and how he worked with all kinds of people in all kinds of situations. "I had to take children away from their parents," he said softly, looking out the window. "I had to approve the welfare documents, the checks for my grandparents who were poor. That left a very strong imprint that there are a lot of people out there who are desperate. A lot of these people who cry out for help really need it. They're not just cheats."

The night before, Dole had given the 100th commencement address at his old high school and he had talked not only of the tough times "when the winds howled and part of the prairie itself was blown away" but also of "a special vision, one which has carried me through all the years since.

"When I needed help, the people of this town were there. Believers in self-reliance, they were no less committed to the notion of Russell as a family, a place where you know your neighbors as flesh-and-blood creations and not as some statistic on a government printout."

Dole was recalling the years after he was wounded in Italy near the end of World War II, when he spent more than three years in and out of hospitals as doctors tried to repair his damaged arms and right shoulder. At one point the people of Russell joined together to help pay for operations that finally put his body back together enough so he could lead a full life.

"The thing you need to remember is you come from a

Dole at work in his Washington office: A 12-hour workday is "slacking off."

very special place," Dole continued. "The horizon is out there somewhere, and if you just keep chasing it, looking for it, working for it, you'll make your mark not only on Kansas, but on America . . . even if it takes 30 or 40 years."

Dole has made his mark, but he is still chasing the horizon.

In the capital the senator and his wife are known as "the power couple." Even their dog, Leader, is a star, spending his days either at the senator's office or Elizabeth Dole's office, a lot more comfortable life than the little Schnauzer faced before he was rescued from an animal shelter by Mrs. Dole and given to her husband when he was elected majority leader.

The senator's office is down the hall from the Senate chamber, and inside are three portraits. Two are of former presidents: Dwight Eisenhower, who came from Abilene, Kan.; and Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican president. The third is of Pocohantas, "because it's a nonchauvinistic office," says Dole, who also has a photograph of the secretary of transportation on the mantel. In another room, where the British once stuffed the fledgling nation's library in the fireplace as they tried to burn the Capitol down, hangs a portrait of Gerald Ford, the former president who chose Dole as a running mate in 1976. Outside is Dole's balcony, where he can sit in the sun contemplating the best view in town, especially at sunset when the glow lights the Washington Monument.

But Dole, who sometimes seems to inhale politics instead of air and considers a 12-hour workday slacking off, is not someone who sits around enjoying the view for long. In addition to running a sometimes balky Senate, he holds meetings—seemingly with half the world. He meets with his staff, with the committee chairmen, with White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan, with Secretary of State George Shultz, with representatives from the agriculture department, with the leader of the rebels in Angola, with constituents from Kansas, with old-time baseball players, with the president of Mexico, with political operatives planning his 1988 race.

Sometimes he shows them his balcony. Such was the case with Antonin Scalia, who visited Dole's office a few days after the judge was nominated for the Supreme Court.

Other times he enthusiastically gives Capitol tours to visitors, including the gnarled turbaned leaders of Afghanistan's mujahideen fighters.

Then there are passing tourists whom Dole encounters on the short walk from his office to the chamber. As a gaggle of reporters tries to ask about the status of the tax bill or the fate of a filibuster, the senator happily poses for pictures with his new fans as he alternates between tossing off quips and answering the questions.

In the two years that he has been majority leader Dole also has used power and persuasion sometimes to strong-arm and sometimes to cajole his colleagues into approving important and controversial legislation in addition to the myriad bills that just keep the government running.

Considered a master at finding the compromise that will unlock or head off deadlocks between the two parties and between the Senate and the administration, he has been able to gain approval of some things President Reagan wants, such as aid to the contras, and some things the Senate wants but the President doesn't, such as sanctions against the government of South Africa.

Dole was elected majority leader by his Republican Senate colleagues after being the highly regarded chairman of the Senate Finance Committee that produced three big tax bills, one lowering taxes, as the President wanted, and two raising taxes after it became apparent that the deficit was going to soar out of sight because of the loss of revenues, just as Dole and some others had warned. The

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senator also was one of the main movers behind the 1983 bail-out of the Social Security system that eased concerns that the program would run out of money in the next few years.

In the process of producing the tax and Social Security legislation, Dole often worked and sometimes battled with Rep. Dan Rostenkowski [D., Ill.], chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. As does everyone when asked about him, Rostenkowski first mentions Dole's "tremendous sense of humor." Then the tough Chicago pol, who has been known to cut a deal or two and has a taste for politics as a blood sport, said, "If I were going into combat I would love to fight Dole because we could walk away and still be friends. I don't think he carries a grudge." But the real joy, Rostenkowski says, would be besting Dole—even though "he would never admit defeat."

The leader's intense desire to win and the fact that he almost always does has riled some senate Democrats who contend Dole is more partisan and not as fair as his predecessor, former Tennessee senator Howard Baker. Not that Baker wasn't tough and very effective. He was. But he didn't have quite the same hard edge that Dole has, and by the end of his tenure in 1984, before he retired to consider a run for president in 1988, there was some grousing that Baker was too nice to his colleagues and had let the Senate get out of hand.

This year, with majority control of the Senate not only for the next two years but perhaps for many years to come, hanging on the November elections, partisan feeling has been running high. As Dole exercised iron discipline over the floor, Democrats contended they didn't have a fair chance to try to modify legislation or score political points. They said the leader wouldn't allow full debates or votes on bills unless he could prevail. Part of the problem, according to a Democratic aide, is that the Democrats are feeling frustrated after five years of being the minority party following decades of holding the majority. "Bob Dole has taught the Democrats what being in the minority is all about," says a high-ranking Republican aide who has not always been one of the leader's bigger fans.

But Sen. Alan Dixon [D., Ill.], who is up for re-election this year, thinks Dole has been doing what a majority leader is supposed to do. "I think he's following the Republican agenda," Dixon says. "He's aggressive. He's also effective. Majority leaders that are effective are pretty tough. If he can't deliver, he can't stay as majority leader. They don't pay a whole lot for second in this business."

Sen. Pete Domenici [R., N.M.], chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, who probably has worked as closely as anyone with Dole, says part of the reason for friction with the Democrats, especially Byrd, could be a difference in style. While the minority leader is a careful student of the tradition-bound, complicated and often plodding Senate rules, "Bob Dole is quick and takes a lot of risks. He says, 'This is what we're supposed to do, let's do it.' Dole leads a lot by intuition. His legislative instincts are probably as good as those of anyone who's been around here for a long time, and he's one of the best legislators ever to have served as leader."

But even some of his strongest admirers wonder if Dole doesn't act too much from instinct, trying to do it all himself without consulting others or without the careful planning that was one of Baker's strong points.

As part of the effort to hold the Senate for the Republicans, Dole has been traveling the country, campaigning for his colleagues who are up for re-election and for GOP candidates going after Democratic seats. It is important to Dole to remain majority leader, not only because he likes his job but because it could be the cornerstone of his try for the Republican presidential nomination.

Asked about his credentials for the 1988 presidential nomination, Dole says, "I think the thing some people talk about is my leadership experience, making decisions, actually getting things done, not just tossing out ideas and waiting for the tie votes." The senator was referring, if a bit obliquely, to two potential rivals, Rep. Jack Kemp [R., N.Y.], who showers the news media with speeches and position papers, and Vice President George Bush, who must break ties in the Senate in favor of

Dole with Rep. James Broyhill [R., N.C.] in the Senate dining room.

the administration and, much to Dole's delight, has cast three votes in favor of producing poison-gas weapons and one that would have frozen Social Security cost-of-living allowances.

"I think people do want experience," Dole says. "Now [Jimmy] Carter came in as an outsider, and that didn't work out too well. President Reagan came in as somewhat of an outsider, and it has worked fairly well. But it seems to me that experience is not a bad asset."

After his forays around the country, especially to Iowa, where Dole hopes his experience with agricultural issues might help him in the all-important first caucus state, the senator is cautiously optimistic about his chances. "If I'm going to do this, I have to do well in Iowa," he says. "That's where you can test Bush. It seems to me there's an opportunity there. In most of the states Bush has the party hierarchy, but that's a caucus state. It's a very important farm state. I think it's an area I should be able to make some headway in.

"Right now, it feels good out there," Dole says, summarizing his chances. "I try not to be naive about it; you've got to be objective. But I think it is wide open. One of my colleagues said, 'You're just like Ferdinand in the Kentucky Derby.' I didn't see the Derby, but apparently he was just sort of in the pack and then he rounded the curve and *swoooosh*. The only Ferdinand I saw was in the Belmont Stakes when he finished third in the mud."

Many political observers think that Dole, or any other Republican, will have to seduce the activist right wing of the party to win the nomination. In an effort to woo these conservatives, who gave their hearts to Ronald Reagan and may never find another true love, Dole in recent months appears to have tilted to the right, though he contends he always has been conservative. That's true to a certain extent. He certainly was considered conservative when he arrived in the Senate in 1969 after four terms in the House, where he once was described as "somewhere to the right of Genghis Khan."

The freshman senator promptly made a reputation for himself by vehemently defending the policies of the Nixon administration while attacking its critics and angering opponents with his abrasive ambition. Ironically, Dole's performance in his first year was very similar to that years later of Sen. Tom Harkin [D., Ia.], an outspoken and abrasive liberal from a farm state, who consistently got under Dole's skin last year as he stepped beyond the bounds normally observed by freshman senators.

But Dole has always voted for civil rights legislation, and, after several years, he seemed to become more moderate on other issues, joining at one point with Sen. George McGovern, a liberal Democrat from South Dakota, to rewrite and save the food stamp program. By the time he became chairman of the finance committee in 1981 and then majority leader, Dole was regarded as a pragmatic moderate. Some younger conservatives were calling him the "tax collector for the welfare state"

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while they made goo-goo eyes at Kemp and other possible presidential contenders.

It's possible that not only has Dole changed from his early days but also that the times have changed and that a politician perceived as a raw-meat conservative in 1969 might seem pretty moderate in Ronald Reagan's world of 1986. Though his office printer has been running overtime turning out strongly worded statements on international issues, such as why the U.S. should not abide by the unratified second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, and Dole has cooled some of his differences with Reagan over such domestic issues as increasing taxes, it's not clear that the majority leader has shifted his position in the last year.

But the debate over Dole's tilt is the kind of canapé political observers love to nibble on as they wait for the main course, the presidential elections. Sen. Paul Laxalt of Nevada, who is considering running for the GOP nomination himself if no one seems able to pick up the conservative mantle, says of Dole's efforts, "Bob's making a tremendously good impression among conservatives." At the same time, Laxalt is noticeably subdued when speaking of Bush, suggesting that many Reagan conservatives regard the vice president as a "moderate."

Sen. Edward Kennedy, who does a radio show with Dole called "Face-Off" that features the two trading political barbs, twitted the majority leader about his presidential ambitions and his courting of conservatives during one program last summer. "Your tilt to the right isn't even convincing, Bob," Kennedy said. "You've done too much good on civil rights and food for the hungry to be credible to those right-wingers. You're also the architect of the biggest tax increase in history, the 1982 tax hike that undid much of the Reagan tax cut of 1981. Try selling that to the right wing, Bob."

"Ted, you've been reading those liberal newspapers again," replied Dole, who told a reporter that one reason for his more conservative stance was his feeling that the Republican leader "has got to reflect the views of all his colleagues." He recalled that the question of whether he was too moderate was an issue in the leadership race: "East [the late Sen. John East of North Carolina] told me, 'I don't like the new Bob Dole. I like the old one better.' "

In 1980 Dole ran hard, if briefly, for the Republican presidential nomination. He announced his candidacy, then conducted a disorganized and underfunded campaign that went nowhere and ended early. This time "I would have to have a crackerjack organization to be able to raise some money," Dole says. "That's first. Before you start saving the world, you have to be able to get into the field. Then if I decide to do it, I think you have to be committed and be prepared for the ups and downs of any campaign. And fairly early on you've got to have a blueprint of what you would propose to do if you were elected, sort of a vision."

And what might that vision be? The senator, who is accused by some of being too wrapped up in issues and accused by others of not being sufficiently issue-oriented, says, "I'm not prepared to say this is Bob Dole's prescription for A, B, C." But then he launches into an alphabetical listing of issues, beginning with agriculture, "because there's no way we're going to be able to sustain a $30-billion-a-year program, particularly where farmers don't like it.

"I think the biggest unsolved problem is how do we control federal spending and reduce the deficit," Dole continues, trying to avoid the idea that taxes will have to be increased to control the deficit. But asked about revenues, a tender subject because of the anti-tax conservatives, Dole says, "I don't think you can duck it. Somebody is going to have to do it [raise taxes] one of these days. This deficit is building and building and building, and it's going to explode all over everybody."

Dole is organizing a group of young lawyers, including two of his former finance committee chiefs of staff, to look into domestic problems and issues. Another group is being set up to examine foreign affairs. "There are a lot of areas that we're starting to get into now, how do we deal with the drug problem, the crime problem, immigration, trade," the senator says. "We're not there yet. We need to spend a lot of time on these issues. We're doing the same with about 40 people around the country to get input on some of these very issues. It seems to me it's one thing to dream up an answer here. It's another thing for people who are dealing with it every day to give you some input. The whole world doesn't revolve around the capital. You're not going to solve the problems unless you get out there and listen to some of the people who are really hurting."

These days the senator polishes the image of a tough, can-do leader who also is compassionate, concerned and willing to listen. Some call him the "new Bob Dole" in contrast to the rough, partisan gut-fighter who hacked up Democrats and was known as a "political sniper" during much of the 1970s. When he was about to become chairman of the Republican Party in 1971, former Sen. William Saxbe, a liberal Republican from Ohio, called Dole a "hatchetman." After he got the party job, Dole flung cutting one-liners at various Democrats, including former Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark, whom he called a "left-leaning marshmallow."

Though he was GOP chairman at the beginning of the Watergate scandal, Dole was never implicated and, in fact, had been critical of the way administration officials who later were forced from office handled the 1972 campaign. Over the years he has answered Watergate questions with either, "It was my night off" or, "I was busy pulling a job in Chicago." At the same time, the senator began his move toward the center on issues, and in 1976 President Gerald Ford picked him to be his running mate. They started out more than 30 points behind Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale, the Democratic ticket, and almost won, losing by only 2 percentage points. Though the Republicans carried the farm states, where Dole was supposed to be strong, and lost the South, where Carter was a native son, the perception has persisted for 10 years that Dole cost the Republicans the election. The reason was his aggressive campaign style that featured such assaults as labeling Carter "Southern-fried McGovern."

Dole really got into trouble during a televised debate with Mondale when he referred to wars fought by the U.S. in the 20th Century as "Democrat wars." There was speculation that the remark reflected a bitter, dark side of the candidate, and the controversy gave the Democrats an issue: They planted the idea that Dole might be dangerous if he ever became president, while Mondale would be calm and safe.

Audience members at Dole's speeches across the country now often remark that he seems more relaxed, more cordial. "His wit has lost that dreadful edge," says a woman in Chicago. "The difference really jumped out at me," says Democrat Alex Seith, who saw Dole at the GOP fundraiser. Seith, who earned his own reputation as a cutting campaigner when he ran against former Sen. Charles Percy in 1978, says, "I know how hard it is to get perceptions changed, and it struck me that the man has grown a lot." Still, some GOP activists mutter about 1976, blaming Dole for the loss of the White House, though as one Republican senator says, "If they want to blame someone, they should blame Ford for pardoning Nixon" after he resigned because of Watergate.

Dole says he is "rarely asked" about 1976 any more, "though I assume somebody will find that debate tape somewhere." His standard reply to questions about the vice presidential campaign is, "I was supposed to go for the jugular and I did—my own."

In a recent session supporters were asked to list his strengths and weaknesses, he says, and "hatchetman" was 13th on the weakness list. [First was being too much of a Washington insider.] "My No. 1 strength," he says, "was Elizabeth."

Elizabeth Dole somehow manages to be a cross between a homecoming queen and a Cabinet officer, a mixture of sweetness and shrewdness that charms those who meet her. A native of North Carolina, graduate of Harvard Law School and veteran of several high-ranking government jobs, she married the senator in December of 1975. He and his first wife, a physical therapist he met when he was recovering from his war wounds, were divorced in 1972 and have a daughter, Robin.

In Elizabeth Dole's office at the Department of Transportation hangs a painting of her husband and, right above it, a photograph of herself with the late Dr. Hampar Kelikian, the Chicago doctor who gave back to Dole partial use of his right arm and, as the senator said when Kelikian died, "gave me a purpose as well."

Robert Dole was a strapping young man who stood 6 feet 2 inches, weighed 186 pounds and had the powerful build of an athlete when he left the University of Kansas and went off to war, eventually ending up with the Army's 10th Mountain Division in Italy in 1945. On April 14, Lt. Dole was leading his platoon through heavy fire across a clearing when he was hit by something, perhaps fragments of a mortar shell, perhaps a bullet, that shattered his right shoulder, damaged his spine and paralyzed him.

After lying wounded for hours [Dole later described it as "sort of a long day"], he was taken from the battlefield to the first of a series of hospitals where he would spend more

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