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Dole is relishing new role

Underdog role suits GOP minority leader

By ADAM CLYMER
The New York Times

WASHINGTON — In this power-focused capital, an ultimate insider is finding new satisfaction in a seemingly diminished role: as the minority leader of a party suddenly thrust from power.

After eight years of trying to serve the competing interests of two Republican presidents and a few dozen Republican senators as minority leader, Bob Dole



Dole

Dole is having the time of his life. He is in a role that suits his personality better, as the scrappy underdog challenging a popular president.

The Senate minority leader has baffled the administration and united the sometimes fractious Senate Republicans in opposition to President Clinton's \$19.5 billion economic stimulus plan.

He has won on that fight. Clinton's retreat to \$15.5 billion Friday was probably only the first step on a road toward a compromise that will have to be counted an administration setback.

One reason Dole succeeds is single-mindedness and persistence. It is no burden for him to have one meeting after another, with the same people, on the same subject, in search of consensus.

"Politics is his life," said Sen. Alan Simpson of Wyoming, the deputy Republican leader.

"You might be sitting at a dinner with Bob Dole and somebody might be talking about ball scores and somebody else about Washingtoniana and Bob would say: 'I think there's a primary going on in the fifth district of California. Let's see how it's going.'"

A liberating loss

Under President George Bush, Dole loyally supported the president's programs despite doubts about them and a bitter 1988 primary campaign when he made it clear that he considered Bush privileged and shallow.

Bush's defeat in 1992 seems to have liberated Dole.

He did tell a recent Gridiron Club dinner that the president's 1992 campaign had gone pretty well, considering that it was Dr. Jack Kevoorkian's first try as a campaign manager.

The political difference between having a Republican president to support and a Democrat to challenge is obvious. In opposition "you sort of get to pick your shots," he said in his Capitol office overlooking the Mall and the Washington Monument last week.

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But if the political environment has changed dramatically, the basics of the personality of the five-term senator have not. He bantered easily with hecklers in New Hampshire several times Thursday, until one said the senator did not care about America.

Then Dole glared and, before striding off, pointed to a lapel pin of the Society of the Purple Heart, which he earned from a wound in World War II that cost him the use of his right arm.

On Wednesday, on the 48th anniversary of the battle in the Po Valley when he was wounded, he told fellow veterans of Italian campaign with the 10th Mountain Division, "Maybe those of us who have been in combat or somewhere, understanding how bad it can be, can understand" the need to provide aid to bolster democracy in Russia.

"It's in our interest if we want to avoid future conflicts, which may involve our children or our grandchildren."

The great untangler

Dole talked at one stop after another about the fight against the economic stimulus bill fight, insisting that Republicans would rather cut spending than add to the deficit. He did say, however, that in a \$6 trillion economy, the money involved in the bill itself was rather inconsequential.

Dole has never been known as a legislative innovator, but instead as one who takes his greatest pleasure in untangling snarls — that he may have helped create — and saving a crucial measure, like the civil rights and unemployment bills of 1991.

And he talks of the fight against the economic stimulus bill as a tactical success that may help on bigger issues.

"I hope it's a signal to the people who run the White House, not just the president, but others, that we have quite a few thoughtful people on our side," he said.

As he continued, Dole made it clear how that signal should be read.

"We thought we were going to be consulted on health care, and we haven't heard zip, not since Mrs. Clinton stood right here and talked to 35 of us" on Feb. 4.

He made the same points whenever he was questioned on the subject as he traveled the country last week.

"If ever there was one issue that cried out for bipartisan or nonpartisan consideration, it's health care," he told the Chamber of Com-

merce in Manchester, N.H.

Health care, he told former campaign workers there, is "one of the most important issues that I've been exposed to in all the time I've been here."

A new 'gridlock'

But if health legislation is something he wants to help pass, there are plenty of other measures Dole would like to block. He predicted a successful filibuster against legislation to revise campaign financing, for example, saying Democrats would write a bill to help themselves, not the country.

He is sensitive to the risk that if a bill is popular, the public will see the delays as the villains. The administration has earnestly shouted "gridlock" about the stimulus bill, saying Republicans were thwarting efforts to create new jobs.

So Dole is trying to rehabilitate the word "gridlock" itself from the scorn into which it fell as a description of the inability of the Democratic Congress and the Republican president to get anything done last year.

"If you're against something," he told some editors in Concord, N.H., "you'd better hope there is a little gridlock."

In fact, he said he does not expect to thwart Clinton all that often, although Senate Republicans have delayed almost every bill this year for a while.

"You're not going to win them all by a long shot," he said, because Republicans "don't always agree on everything."

The most obvious example was the family leave bill, which Dole strongly opposed but 16 of the 43 Senate Republicans voted for.

And there will be times, as he insisted to one audience after another, when Republicans will be providing support that Clinton cannot do without, on issues like aid to Russia or international trade.

Then he told the chamber of commerce: "We're not mad at each other. We're both adults. We both understand that from time to time we'll have differences."

And he said again and again that while Republicans disagreed with Clinton "we're not trying to embarrass" him.

His safety valve

Dole's national reputation for bitter comments is at odds with the sense of most senators that his humor is a useful safety valve to relieve tension.

Nationally, he is remembered for speaking of "Democrat wars" in his first national campaign, for the vice presidency in 1976, and in 1988 for demanding that Bush and his aides stop "groveling in the mud" in attacking his wife, Elizabeth Dole, and "stop lying about my record."

But Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah recalled that his dry humor relaxed Republicans uncertain about how to proceed with questioning in the

hearings involving Anita Hill's accusations against Judge Clarence Thomas.

And Sen. John Chafee of Rhode Island recalled how Dole broke up Clinton and Republicans at a caucus. The president was given a mystery titled "Murder in the Senate" and observed that he was troubled that the victim was a Democrat.

Dole quipped, "Yes, it had a happy ending."

His humor sometimes turns on himself, as an instinctive check. He was holding forth in the Senate on Inauguration Day about how Republicans had no intention of blocking Clinton's initiatives. Then, as if he were overcome by honesty, he added "except maybe once in a while."

And at one point in his complaints about exclusion from the health-care task force, he reflected: "I'm trying to be objective. What would we do if we had the majority in Congress and the White House? Would we care what the other party thought?"

He said, "I think we might," but then acknowledged that Republican White House aides might not.

White House bid?

One consequence of Dole's new prominence as his party's leading spokesman is a flurry of talk about his running for president in 1996. He enjoyed teasing New Hampshire Republicans about it last week.

And Sen. George Mitchell of Maine, the majority leader, said Dole would be "a formidable opponent" for Clinton. But Mitchell and Dole are friends, who respect and try not to surprise each other.

In fact, Dole's considerable political skills have rarely traveled well outside the singular circumstances of the Senate or audiences of highly partisan Republicans.

But if there is little reason to think he can improve on his past performance as a national candidate, there is little doubt of his strength in the Senate.

Sen. John Danforth of Missouri, less conservative than Dole on most issues though a firebrand on the economic stimulus bill, nominated him for the leadership after the 1984 election and said "Bob Dole has soul."

Last week he said the leader was "not a bomb thrower. He's a legislator."

In the Bush administration, Dole often was caught between conservatives who wanted to fight the president from one side and moderates dissatisfied from the other, although it was the conservatives who gave him the most trouble.

But none of them are complaining these days.

Senate Republicans are surprised to be so united and so effective. For, as Dole says, under the Senate's rules, which require 60 votes to shut off debate, "As long as we have 41 standing together, they can't pass anything."

Monday, April 19, 1993, Hutchinson, Kansas,

Dole relishes role as thorn in Clinton's side

By Adam Clymer
N.Y. Times News Service

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privileged and shallow.

He did tell a recent Gridiron Club dinner that the president's 1992 campaign had gone pretty well, considering that it was Dr. Jack Kevoorkian's first try as a campaign manager. But his conversation is not dotted, as it once was, with class-conscious references like charges that when Ivy League colleges admitted relatives of alumni, mostly white males, they were violating the Civil Rights Act.

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