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Dole tones down, tunes up act

Kansan stakes out some middle ground

By Steve Goldstein
Eagle Washington bureau

WASHINGTON — What's with Bob Dole?

After playing Darth Vader for much of Bill Clinton's presidency, the Kansan is turning statesman in his second go-round as Senate majority leader.

Dole is toning down his acting out against the Democrats, raising his differences with conservative Republicans, and even subtly criticizing his successor in the black helmet, House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

ANALYSIS

As political columnist Mark Shields remarked at a congressional dinner last week, "You know the winds of change have blown through Washington when the Republicans are playing good cop, bad cop — and Bob Dole is the good cop."

Is Dole, 71, positioning himself for his third bid for the White House or simply trying to lead the GOP into the politics of the possible?

Wisconsin's Steve Gunderson, leader of a group of moderate Republicans in the House said, "Dole senses an opportunity to appeal to folks who want bipartisan solutions in a Washington that works."

So Dole is low-keying his critique of the party out of power and concentrating instead on realpolitik for Republicans.

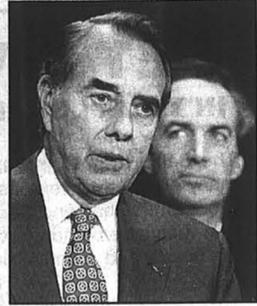
Dole's future as a presidential contender "is hostage to the success of the Republican Congress," said GOP strategist William Kristol.

"He wants to lower the public expectations as to what that success should be."

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Sen. Bob Dole has been carefully separating himself from the GOP pack.



Photos by The Associated Press

Sen. Phil Gramm (left) believes he's laid the foundation to carry Arizona next year, but Sen. Bob Dole (right) has other ideas.

Gramm easily wins Arizona straw poll

But Dole poll shows far different result

The Associated Press

PHOENIX — Texas Sen. Phil Gramm was the runaway winner in Arizona's first Republican presidential straw poll Saturday.

Gramm received 460 of the approximately 850 votes cast, which was more than the 50 percent he said was his goal, but well behind the 72 percent he scored in a similar contest Jan. 7 in Louisiana.

Conservative commentator Pat Buchanan, who challenged President Bush in the 1992 GOP primaries, finished a distant second Saturday with 112 votes. Conservative talk show host and former Reagan administration official Alan Keyes was third with 98 votes.

The straw poll was conducted at the state GOP's annual convention. Significantly, Gramm, Buchanan and Keyes were the only candidates among the 11 listed on the straw poll ballot to address the convention.

"I think we laid the foundation to carry Arizona next year and to win the first primary in the first

Southwestern state," Gramm said.

Others who received votes were former Congressman Jack Kemp, 45; former Vice President Dan Quayle, 40; Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, 27; Pennsylvania Sen. Arlen Specter, 15; former Tennessee Gov. Lamar Alexander, 11; Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson, 5; Massachusetts Gov. William Weld, 4; California Gov. Pete Wilson, 3; and former Reagan and Bush administration figure James Baker, 1.

Dole had been removed from the ballot at his own request but was nominated from the floor.

Dole commissioned his own survey of Arizona voters in advance of the straw poll in an attempt to take the sting out of an anticipated defeat. It showed him leading with 37 percent of the vote to 29 percent for Quayle and 14 percent for Gramm.

Pollster Neil Newhouse, who conducted the poll for Dole, said his survey "is obviously a more reliable measure of Republican opinion than a straw ballot involving only GOP state convention delegates."

DOLE

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What distinguishes the 1995 model Dole is not so much his approach to the other party as his relationship with his own.

Dole, who is well ahead in public opinion polls about likely Republican presidential candidates, has been carefully separating himself from the GOP pack, particularly from those who have carved the Contract with America on stone tablets and are bearing same around Capitol Hill.

"He doesn't have to be the innovator of these ideas," Kristol said. "He has to be the implementer."

Since the election, Dole has tried to stake out leadership positions on two issues: the future of the United Nations and unfunded federal mandates.

"We now have 30 Republican governors," said a Dole campaign strategist. "He was smart to get out in front on the mandates issue."

At the same time, Dole is looking for loopholes in the Contract.

Item: Although he favors a provision in the balanced-budget amendment that would require a three-fifths majority to approve future tax increases, Dole doesn't think the

votes for approval are there.

Item: Dole opposes two ideas many Republicans want to see in a welfare reform package — cutting off aid to welfare mothers under age 18 and denying public assistance to legal aliens.

Item: Dole is cautioning Republicans not to waste time trying to overturn the ban on assault weapons, saying there aren't enough votes and a lengthy debate would sabotage other, higher-priority issues.

Item: Dole directly contradicted Gingrich last week after Gingrich predicted approval on a bailout loan deal for Mexico. "My assessment is that they are not getting close" to rounding up enough votes, Dole said.

"He seems to be divorcing himself of the lightning rods," said Rep. James Greenwood, R-Pa. "I think he's been told that if he's going to run for president, better avoid the issues you can't easily explain."

Others suggest that Dole is simply acting as a good majority leader.

"Dole is a legislative strategist, and he is just reflecting on what is possible," said pollster William McInturff, who has done research for a Dole non-profit think tank called the Better America Foundation.

"You know the winds of change have blown through Washington when the Republicans are playing good cop, bad cop — and Bob Dole is the good cop."

Mark Shields

"It is very healthy for the party to have strong visible leadership that is expressing different thoughts," said Rep. Nancy Johnson, R-Conn.

Yet Dole is treading on issues that strongly unite the largely conservative Republican freshman class. Is there a risk of a generation gap?

"Bob Dole is just being the leader of the Senate," said rookie Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum. "He's got to hold a consensus."

The consensus among Republicans is that Dole is still figuring the best way to play off of Gingrich.

Dole has been supportive and correct with Gingrich, all the while sizing him up the way a heavyweight champ looks at a fast-closing contender.

Although he has deplored Demo-

cratic carping about the \$4.5 million advance Gingrich accepted and then rejected from a publishing company owned by media magnate Rupert Murdoch, Dole let it be known that he wasn't too happy about the diversion.

"Maybe there's something else he needs to do," Dole said of Gingrich. "Then he ought to do it."

Dole also suggested that the acerbic Gingrich should have expected rough treatment by the Democrats. "As I said before — and it's been applied to me, too — you live by the sword and you die by the sword in this town," said Dole.

Dole's Washington experience — he was elected to the House in 1961 and the Senate in 1968 — means he is seldom bested as a political tactician.

In the recent leadership elections, Dole backed Sen. Alan Simpson, R-Wyo., to be assistant majority leader. But Simpson lost to Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss., a close ally of presidential aspirant Sen. Phil Gramm, R-Texas.

Gramm later lost a bid for a coveted seat on the Finance Committee. Some saw this as the work of Dole and Simpson, who sit on the committee, but both men denied it.

Still, Dole is not happy about leaving the Senate in the conservative

Lott's care while he campaigns for the presidency. This caused Louisiana Democrat John Breaux to say that Dole will run his presidential campaign "from Washington, D.C. ... by fax machine."

Dole was the Republican nominee for vice president in 1976 and briefly contended for the presidential nomination in 1980. He ran again in 1988, winning the Iowa caucuses but collapsing in the New Hampshire primary.

Dole will be 73 at the GOP convention in San Diego. By comparison, Ronald Reagan was 69 when he was nominated in 1980.

While acknowledging Dole's lust for the White House, Lott doesn't believe the majority leader would sacrifice the GOP agenda.

"I don't think he's consciously trying to take a position less conservative than others, or contrary to the Contract," said Lott.

Some, like Rep. Curt Weldon, R-Pa., see a more calculating approach.

"Dole is a realist and he's saying some of these things just can't get done in the Senate," said Weldon. "But he's also playing to that voter out there who might be fearful of some of the things being proposed. He's playing it both ways, and he's playing it smart."

Politics '96

Dole visited Powell about presidential race

By JAKE THOMPSON
Kansas City Star

WASHINGTON — Politically premature or not, Sen. Bob Dole already is kidding about meeting with and considering the field of possible partners for his likely presidential bid.

He confirmed Tuesday a meeting in recent weeks with retired Gen. Colin Powell, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and national hero in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

"The two just 'talked generally' — no pun intended — about the 1996 race, recalled the Senate majority leader from Kansas.

"I did have a nice visit with him, went out to his house a couple of weeks ago," Dole said. "We sat down, had a Diet Coke, spent a couple hours."

"I was kidding him how well he's doing in the polls," Dole said, adding that he told Powell, "I'm not going to

do as well as you are."

Any chance Dole popped the running mate question?

"Naw," said Dole, "sure didn't." Never mind that Powell's political orientation remains unknown, his name rings bells. Eighteen months away from the usual time to be picking running mates, just the idea of him on a Dole ticket was the buzz at the state Republican Party meeting last weekend in Topeka.

"If any morning Colin Powell gets up and decides he wants to get into presidential politics, he is instantly for the next two to three weeks the top political story," said GOP consultant Eddie Mahe. "He is truly a giant if he decides to walk out on the playing field."

Powell is keeping quiet about any interest in national politics. His spokesman said Tuesday that all interview requests are being turned down because the general is busy writing his memoirs, due out in the fall.

Dole talks to Powell about '96 presidential race

By Jake Thompson
Kansas City Star

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Yet, Mahe contended that even the first African-American on a major party ballot would not necessarily have a dramatic impact on the 1996 race. "People



Dole Powell

don't vote for vice president; people vote for the president."

Mahe said Powell's popularity would certainly fall once his views become known on hot-button topics such as taxes, term limits, abortion, welfare or Social Security.

In any event, Powell is keeping quiet about any interest in national politics. His spokesman said Tuesday that all interview requests are being turned down because the general is busy writing his memoirs, due out in the fall.

Besides the five-star Powell, there is a galaxy of Republican governors to consider, Ohio Gov. George Voinovich, for instance, this week took a step interpreted by some as a bid to curry Dole's favor early as a possible running mate.

In announcing he will be running Dole's 1996 campaign in Ohio, Voinovich became the first major public figure to throw support to Dole's candidacy.

On Tuesday, Dole sat down with Minnesota GOP Gov. Arne Carlson, also mentioned as a vice presidential possible. Dole plans to visit with two other governors today, but declined to name them.

The current hot prospect for any GOP presidential candidate is Gov. Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey, who delivered a succinct official GOP response to President Clinton's long State of the Union address last week.

"I haven't met with her yet," Dole said.

It May Be Party Time for Perot

SUBSTITUTING FOR LARRY KING ONE NIGHT LAST WEEK, ROSS PEROT GENTLY prodded Bob Dole to proclaim his presidential candidacy on CNN. The Senate majority leader did not miss a beat: "Maybe I should ask you that question. We could both announce it right here, together." That genial exchange underscored a vital issue about 1996: A Perot campaign would revive Bill Clinton's prospects while hurting Dole or any other Republican. Even as Perot maintains his tease, his advocacy group, United We Stand America, is seeking to form a new, center-right party.

Though still in gestation, the party would have the potential to produce independent candidacies for offices at all levels in many states. The new gambit is a dramatic reversal of strategy. Two years ago, Perot overruled a faction in his following that sought to develop a party. Some activists left in frustration.

This month, however, state directors of his U.W.S.A.—hired and paid by the national headquarters in Dallas—began organizing public meetings at the county level, ostensibly to canvass the group's rank and file, as well as anyone else who cares to attend, on whether they think formation of a new party is in the national interest. In spirit, the ploy resembles Perot's 1992 appeal for public guidance on whether to run for President.

A typical session, last Wednesday night in exurban Bayville, New Jersey, attracted 93 voters despite rain and fog. Norris Clark, the full-time state director, told the group, "We're talking about a major new party—national—right up there with the Republicans and Democrats." Though the G.O.P.'s Contract with America picks up several of U.W.S.A.'s causes, he pointed out, it omits others. When he asked for opinions from the floor, virtually every voice condemned the major parties as hopelessly out of touch. Agnes James, 58, a real estate agent with five children, promised, "We will provide a focus for people who are disgusted with their government and unable to express their frustration in other ways." For James, and several other Perot followers in New Jersey, the exercise is already real. They are running for the state assembly on the ticket of the New Jersey Conservative Party, an infant group that plans to contest all 80 seats in the lower house this year. If it captures 10% of the popular vote, the party will be entitled to its own ballot position for national and state offices in 1996.

Local meetings like the one in Bayville will occur for two months, but already the sentiment is clear. Says Russell Verney, U.W.S.A.'s new executive director: "There is a great deal of energy out there behind a new party." It will take all that energy and more to overcome the many legal and procedural obstacles thrown up by states, but Perot is yearning for a new crusade.

—By Laurence I. Barrett/Bayville



ROSS PEROT LIVE: The potential party leader banters with Dole on CNN