

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Inside Strikes Out

Congress: Bob Dole wanted to look like a leader, but the balanced-budget amendment's collapse only reminded voters why they hate Washington

BY HOWARD FINEMAN AND THOMAS ROSENSTIEL

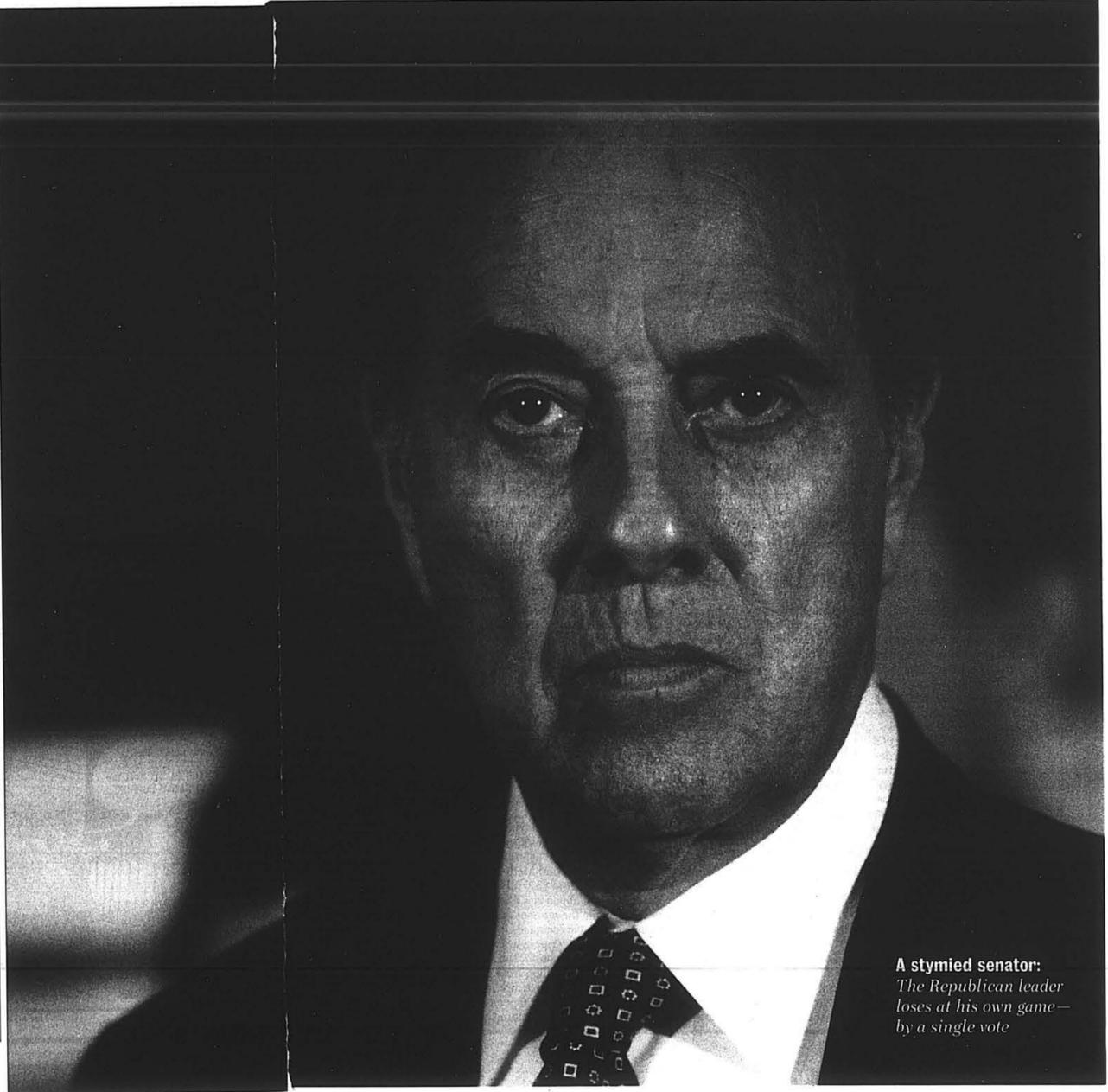
FOR BOB DOLE, WHO ABHORS ASKING for help, it was a galling phone call to make. But he had no choice. Only 14 Senate Democrats were supporting the balanced-budget amendment, six others having tipped away from it since last year. The final hope was Mark Hatfield, the lone "no" vote among 53 Republicans. So last Wednesday Dole placed a call to Houston to Hatfield's good friend—and Dole's own onetime rival—George Bush, NEWSWEEK learned. Would Bush please lend a hand? Would he use his stature as a former president and appeal to Hatfield's loyalty? Bush did his part, of course. He and Dole have come to admire each other, leader to leader. The next day, Hatfield talked to Dole at the Capitol. For the first time in 27 years, Dole told NEWSWEEK, he pleaded with his longtime colleague to "bend" on a principle. "I've never asked you before," Dole said. "I'll probably never ask you again." No dice, Hatfield politely said no.

Angry but resigned, Dole strode to the Senate floor, the only man who knew for sure he'd already lost. With Hatfield glumly seated behind him in the chamber, the Senate voted—and failed by a single senator to reach the two thirds necessary to send the measure to the states. Dole vowed to fight again next year. But he confessed he was "disappointed" in the Senate, and he lashed out in old-Dole fashion at President Clinton. A deal might have been possible with Democrats, he said, "if we had a real president down there."

Dole's bitterness was understandable. He knew perfectly well that this defeat was not just a setback for the balanced-budget amendment or the Republican "Contract With America." It was a personal defeat—and a strong reminder of how hard it will be to run for president from the floor of the U.S. Senate. Instead of emerging last week as the crafty leader who could get the job done, who could take the talk about cutting back on big government and make it reality, Dole found himself identified with less appealing images: gridlock, demagoguery, Washington as usual.

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For Dole, this was to have been a glorious if unofficial campaign "launch." Let Phil Gramm win yet another straw poll—as he did in South Carolina last week. Let Lamar Alexander and Dick Lugar declare their candidacies—as they did last week. Let Pete Wilson plot—as he did last week. Rested and ready after a weekend at his sunny hideaway in Florida, Dole would demonstrate his insider's prowess, put Newt Gingrich in the shade, pass a measure popular among the GOP grass roots and burnish his standing as odds-on favorite for his party's 1996 nomination. What a difference one vote makes. It is Bob Dole's fate to embody Insider Washington, with its maddening mix of ambiguity, cynicism and efficacy. Dole actually maneuvered behind the scenes with considerable skill last week, but the public scenes were almost all bad. The old mean streak re-emerged, if only for a moment. The amendment's failure amplified the talk that the Republicans and their contract were losing momentum.



A stymied senator: The Republican leader loses at his own game—by a single vote

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There was plenty of blame to share. Both parties joined in the cynical maneuvering over the budget. In an attempt to save the amendment, Republicans gutted it by barring the federal judiciary from overseeing enforcement. There was an even more demagogic force at work: Democrats shouting "Social security!" in a crowded theater. There's no way to balance the budget without re-examining social security. With 65 million baby boomers sliding toward retirement, pressure on the system will grow. Without new taxes, at least \$1.5 trillion in spending cuts will be needed to balance the books by early in the next millennium. Social security can't be exempted. Dole and the GOP were willing to risk tacitly admitting these facts, but they couldn't convince enough Democrats to go along. One who did, Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado, quit his party in disgust after the vote and joined the Republicans. A beaming Dole was at his side when he did so.

For Dole, Campbell's arrival—poyntail and all—was cold comfort. The rest of the week was a case study in the pros and cons of his leadership style and his Senate role. Since 1960, 35 sitting senators have sought the presidency and failed; only John F. Kennedy succeeded. And he was a backbencher, unburdened by the need to mute



Capitol clash: Angry House GOP freshmen declare war on the six Democratic senators who 'flip-flopped' on the budget amendment

his views or spend his time in a leadership role. Besides Dole, the other three senators running this time are closer to the backbench: Lugar of Indiana, Gramm of Texas and Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania.

If you're going to run as a savvy, mature insider, you'd better know what you're do-

ing. Dole does, the one-vote loss notwithstanding. He was portrayed as a ball-hogging loner in his losing presidential campaigns of 1980 and 1988. But in pressing the balanced-budget amendment, Dole assigned the work of rounding up votes to a kitchen cabinet of a dozen senators from all

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ideological stripes. He even chose some loyal to the hard-charging Gramm. This "rapid-response team" met in Dole's suite each morning, with "The Leader" available to be summoned from the next room. And Dole did succeed with Republicans: more of his party in the Senate voted for the amendment than ever before.

But Dole misjudged the Democrats—and he's going to need them to prove his effectiveness. With his floor manager, Sen. Orrin Hatch, Dole early on devised a strategy to cut a last-minute deal with Sam Nunn, the conservative from Georgia. They believed he would bring enough other Democrats with him to pass the amendment. NEWSWEEK learned. But when they made the expected agreement with Nunn—limiting the power of judicial review—they were an unexpected vote short. "There were shock waves around here," Sen. Pete Domenici said of the miscalculation. Mr. Inside also lost the outside game. He looked at the polls and saw only one set of

CONTRACT WATCH

Going Nuclear Over Lawsuits

Republicans have had to water down much of the contract, but in one provision they're being tougher than expected.



PROPOSAL: To stop frivolous lawsuits with "common sense" legal reforms.

The contract's fine print focused on just a few areas of law, like those involving defective products. But big business and other groups worried about being sued privately warned that the GOP would get only one shot at legal reform and should, as a key lobbyist said, "go for the nuclear bomb." So the House Republican leadership plans to offer a radical floor amendment clamping down on lawsuits over medical malpractice, auto accidents, airline crashes, sexual harassment and all other personal-injury (or "tort") cases. It would prohibit juries from ever awarding more than \$250,000 for pain and suffering—and would wipe out any state law that allowed larger awards. Personal-injury lawyers and consumer groups are planning a counteroffensive against this surprise attack.

numbers, the ones showing that 79 percent of the American people want a balanced-budget requirement written into the Constitution. But the same polls also show that only 32 percent of Americans support the measure if told it would require "cuts" in social security. The North Dakota

duo, Democrats Kent Conrad and Byron Dorgan, took refuge in the latter number as they were being pursued by Dole and his allies.

And they literally were pursued. After 35 years in Congress, Dole lives to deal—and he thinks a deal is always possible. So he let his colleagues loose in a last-minute hunt for votes on the Senate floor. The resulting scene was reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's description of fox-hunting—the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uncatchable—and a perfect picture of the frenzied insider inaction voters disdain. As the press corps and a packed gallery watched from above, Republican hounds swarmed around Dorgan, and then Conrad.

In the long run, though, Dole is going to have more trouble with his friends. He must impress the GOP's conservative grass roots; that's where the primary voters are. Yet to assemble majorities among his 53 Senate colleagues, he'll need to cater to the GOP's eight moderates—nine now that Campbell has switched. Last week's annoyance was

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Hatfield. Soon enough it could be John Chafee on the environment, James Jeffords on education or Domenici on tax cuts. Dole has his own moderate tendencies to finessence—on affirmative action, for example.

Meanwhile, of course, Dole must fend off criticism from the right—and the Gramm-stand of a certain senator who implied

last week that Dole somehow wasn't fervent enough about passing the contract. In a sign that the old pol can learn new media tricks, Dole had shrewdly called Rush Limbaugh to ask for his help in building support for the amendment—and defend his own leadership on the issue. Limbaugh was nice, and then bit the hand that stroked him.

Rush demanded that Dole punish Hatfield by removing him from the chairmanship of the powerful Appropriations Committee. Dole refused.

Gramm—determined that no rival will "get to the right" of him in 1996—staged his own guerrilla mini-theater. After the possible deal with Conrad fell apart, Gramm made a show of collaring him at

the candy table in a corner of the Senate chamber. Urging Conrad to reconsider, Gramm waved a hand-drawn chart of federal-spending trends at his dazed colleague, to no avail. On Thursday, Gramm got air time by showing up at the last second for the final vote. "I thought we had the doors locked," Dole said later with a smirk.

After the vote, Dole settled into an armchair by a fading fire in his suite near the Senate floor. He was determined to be in laid-back mode. His aides had come up with a good post-vote spin. The outcome was good because it gave Dole's coming campaign a focus: amending the Constitution. Some pundits actually bought the line. Beyond that, the fundamentals were good, his advisers told him. He would be running, after all, for the Republican nomination. He was front runner in a party that generally picks them—and that has had no fatal yearning for dark horses and "outsiders."

He would juggle roles. There would, sadly, be fewer visits to his beloved Sea View Hotel co-op in Bal Harbour, Fla., the sun-baked Valhalla where he spends time with the likes of David Brinkley, Bob Strauss and Howard Baker. They are at the close of their careers, but he, at 71, is going strong. He would dedicate his weekends to "out and backs"—day trips to Iowa and New Hampshire and everywhere else. Through it all, he told NEWSWEEK, he would maintain the "serenity" that comes from knowing that this is his third and last chance at the presidency. He has already lived a life of never-ending struggle between doggedness and bad luck. "Maybe I'll blow it tomorrow," he said quietly. "I don't think so." But, as last week reminded him, you can never be too sure.