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SEE HOW THEY RUN

Already, there's plenty of action on the road to the White House

By RICH HOOD
Editorial Page Editor

If you are one of those eternally hopeful voters who keeps looking for uplifting government instead of non-stop politicking by national leaders, you have to be disappointed today.

Not only has President Clinton refused to interrupt his full-time campaigning for re-election to take time out to run the country, but the increasing number of Republicans who covet Clinton's job have been whirling themselves into public contortions while most of them busily cash and count their weekly toll of taxpayers' dollars.

Consider these recent developments considered significant in assessing what may or may not happen on the road to the White House next year.

■ President Clinton began running \$2 million worth of television campaign commercials in pivotal states last week, including Missouri. This extraordinarily early foray into paid media by a sitting president indicates his one abiding commitment: to win re-election at whatever cost is necessary. Some Republicans immediately labeled Clinton's unusual step as a sign of desperation. Democratic strategists insisted the move was a brilliant strategy to inoculate Clinton from his perceived mushiness in opposing crime.

■ Clinton proclaimed victory from defeat after the Republican-controlled Senate derailed his appointment of Henry Foster to become the new surgeon general. The president declared that abortion opponent extremists in the Republican Party defeated Foster on that issue, but Clinton predicted that women who believe in a woman's right to choose abortion will punish Republicans on that issue next year.

■ Bob Dole, the Senate majority leader, continued to ride high inside and outside the Washington beltway. Political strategists who delight in such things rate

Dole's handling of the Foster defeat as brilliant footwork. Although it may mean less than nothing by national convention time next year, for the moment Dole is awarded extra points for outmaneuvering Senate rival Phil Gramm.

■ Dole, the Kansas Republican, continues to demonstrate his mastery of the insider's political game, and he towers over the rest of the potential Republican field. This presumed stature gap is fueled by his decades on the national scene, which has given him far superior name recognition to any of his rivals. Dole's adroit phrase-making on the national nightly news and on the Sunday morning talking heads programs also continues to position him ahead of all his rivals.

The same can be said for his continuing ability to forge unlikely legislative combinations inside the Senate while constantly adding to the ever-swelling number of Dole adherents among influential Republican big-wigs and activists in states that are key to the presidential nomination.

■ Gramm, the Democrat-turned-Republican from Texas, continues to be flummoxed by Dole inside the Senate where Gramm expected to be

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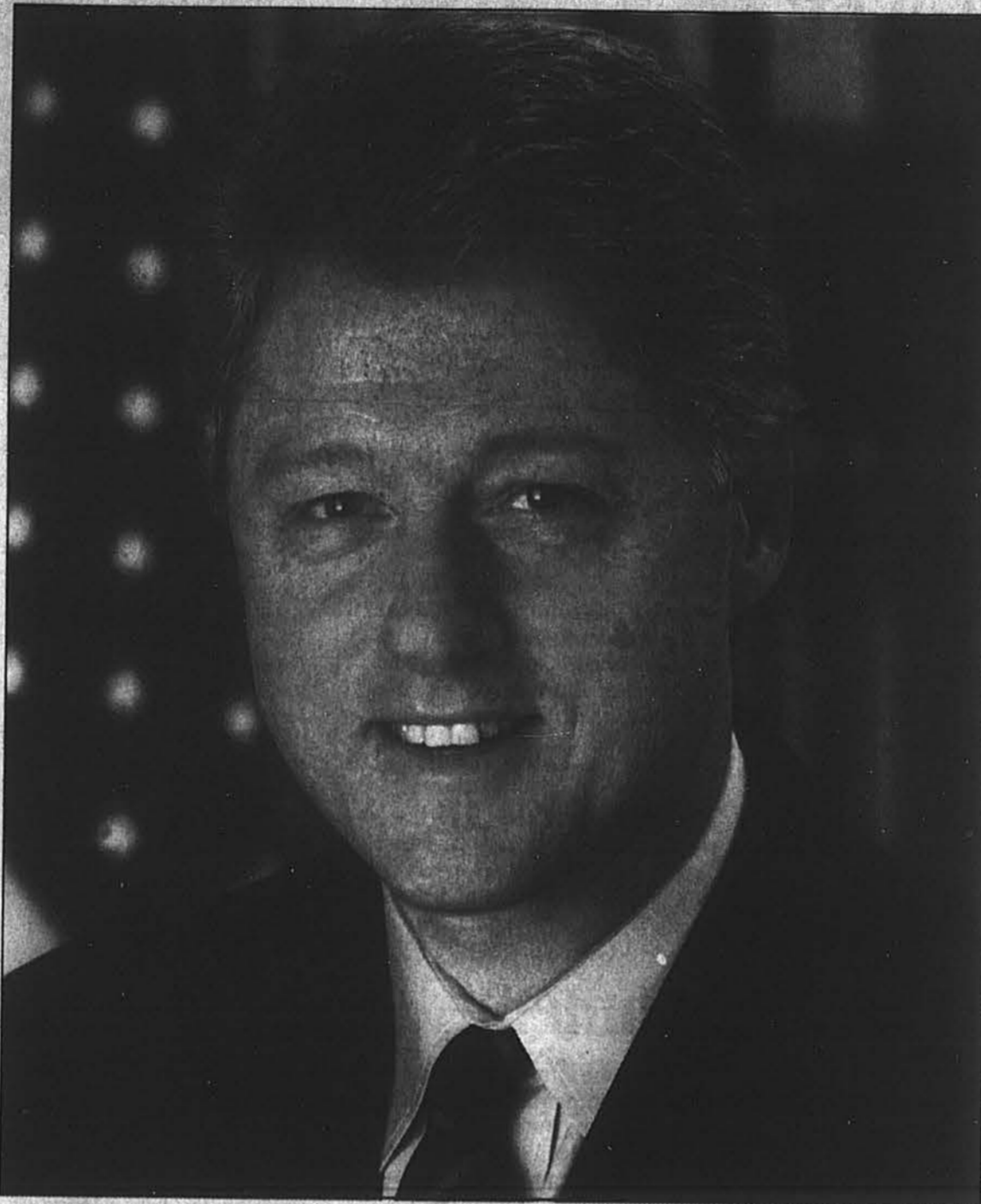
Phil Gramm



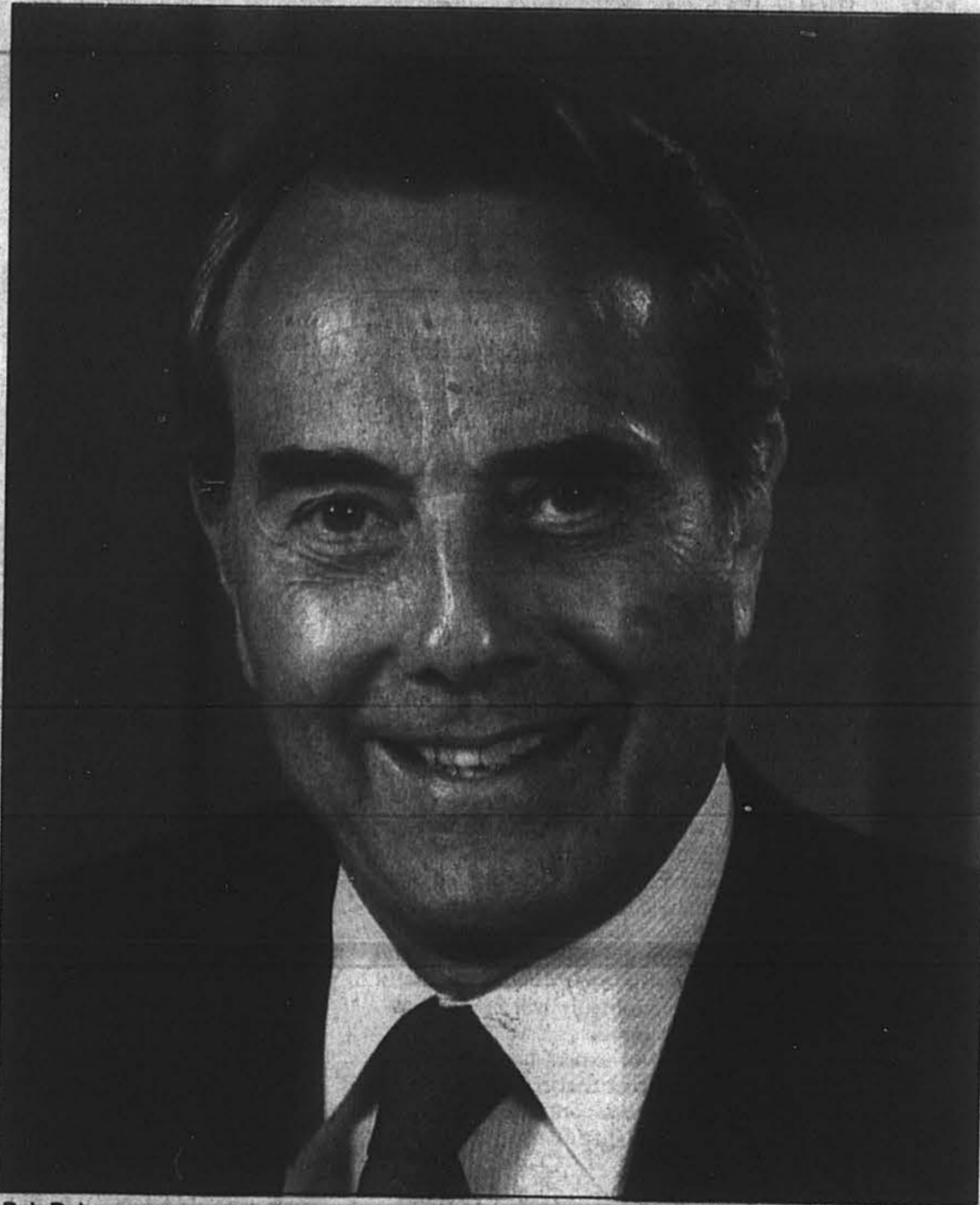
Pat Buchanan



Pete Wilson



Bill Clinton



Bob Dole

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making significant headway in establishing himself as the major competitor to Dole for the Republican nomination. Gramm has been hampered by reports of his investment in a semi-pornographic movie, his unabashed avarice and his total lack of shame for self-aggrandizement. In that last regard Gramm is truly world class.

Despite expectations to the contrary by experts inside and outside the Republican Party, Gramm thus far has experienced a generally dismal lack of acceptance by the conservative Republican activists who will cast the most significant early votes in next year's selection process. In fact, Gramm appears to keep stumbling over his own over-sized ego while gaining little traction toward winning the nomination.

■ Also struggling is California Gov. Pete Wilson, who has been damaged by the apparent hypocrisy in his demagoguery against illegal aliens juxtaposed against the reports that he and his former wife employed an illegal alien and failed to pay Social Security taxes for her. Surgery on his vocal cords has literally quieted the talkative politician, and some of his strongest supporters in the past are refusing to accept Wilson's abandonment of his

promise to complete the gubernatorial term he won in a dramatic come-from-behind battle last year.

■ Pat Buchanan, showing some of the benefits from having run for president before, is being embraced by neo-conservatives who had been expected to fall into the Gramm column. Buchanan's trenchant phrase-making pleases crowds, and his inflammatory adherence to the most sacred causes of religious conservatives is making Buchanan more of a factor than handicappers had expected would be the case.

Having examined those points, however, the wisest course is to remind ourselves that it's still very early in this selection process. Clinton, with his recent lurches to the right, may incite one or more primary opponents from the left. Jesse Jackson has suffered severe public exposure withdrawal syndrome since his last quixotic quest for the White House. And the Rev. Al Sharpton, a shyster who makes Jackson look like the most majestic statesman in decades, is making noises about challenging Clinton.

Many had expected to see some signs of fading by now from Dole who will turn 72 this month. Even though Dole has shamelessly courted the most conservative elements of the religious and economic conservatives who make up a disproportionate share of the early primary voters, many diehard conservatives continue to question