



■ POLITICS

Bring Me the Head Of Sheila Burke

Right-wingers say Dole's chief aide is too liberal. As proof of his conservatism, they want her out

By KAREN TUMULTY WASHINGTON

AFTER A WEEK OF NEGOTIATION, there came a day in April when the first major spending-cut bill of the G.O.P. Congress had reached a delicate final stage. That was when someone in the Senate cloakroom handed a slip of paper to Trent Lott of Mississippi, the second-ranking Senate Republican. On it was a column of figures—the Democrats' final offer. Lott looked it over and paused. "I guess the only thing left to do is check this with the leader," he said. That would

not be necessary. Poring over the numbers with him was a weary-looking blond woman in sensible Ferragamo pumps. Without hesitation she told him, "Dole's O.K. on this."

The woman with the power to give Dole's on-the-spot approval was his chief of staff, Sheila Burke, 44, a former registered nurse—and former liberal-leaning Democrat. By virtue of her power to speak for the majority leader and negotiate on his behalf, Burke is the most powerful woman on Capitol Hill—with a chance to hold even greater power in the White

RIGHT-HAND WOMAN: Her critics say Burke, left, is too quick to compromise

House if her boss becomes the next President. The remarkable thing about Burke's working relationship with Dole is that she enjoys the complete trust of a man who does not offer it easily. And she possesses a rare understanding of a character unfathomable even to colleagues who have dealt with him for decades in Congress. "My goal is to do what Dole needs," she says with typical understatement. "I basically think I do a good job."

In the months to come, Dole will be relying on her more than ever as he attempts the two biggest feats of his career: winning the White House while still leading the Republican revolution in the Senate. Accordingly, he has handed Burke the largest challenge of her own career by plunging her into the Senate fight over welfare reform, which has become as much a contest between moderates and conservatives within the G.O.P. as it is between Republicans and Democrats. It's the G.O.P. stand-off that has kept a welfare-reform bill even from reaching the Senate floor, where it was supposed to have been debated this week. For the most dedicated conservatives, a bill that penalizes out-of-wedlock

pregnancy is a non-negotiable demand. And for them Burke is the obstacle.

By blasting Hollywood and sabotaging Henry Foster's nomination as Surgeon General, candidate Dole has succeeded so far in courting the no-compromise Republican right. But because of his long years as a Senate dealmaker, the party's most insatiable conservatives still have deep misgivings about Dole. In recent weeks they have been venting them on Burke, the person most likely to run his White House as chief of staff or steer social policy as Secretary of Health and Human Services. It is nothing short, says Burke, of "an orchestrated effort to get Dole to remove me from my job." Dole says that will not happen and bristles at suggestions that she somehow controls him. "I don't know if any of these people know Sheila or know what she does," he told TIME. "She doesn't have any agenda, as far as I know, except carrying out the Republican agenda."

Burke's enemies, however, see her as Dole's bad angel, the woman who urges on his predisposition to compromise. Not for Dole is Margaret Thatcher's credo that consensus is the negation of leadership. And not for Burke. Beyond that, some are even casting her as a Beltway Lady Macbeth—the wily, power-hungry woman who works her (secretly liberal) will through a feckless politician.

"She is a feminist who has mastered the art of manipulating the Senate majority leader," ultra-conservative guru Paul Weyrich wrote last week in the Washington Times. "Men of his generation don't know how to handle aggressive women of a younger generation." Robert Novak, whose newspaper column is a bulletin board of the latest mood swings among movement conservatives, implied last month that Burke's brand of "militant feminism is the heart of the welfare problem." And, of course, comparisons with the pre-eminent woman of influence in Washington are inevitable: "If the American people like Hillary Clinton, they will love Sheila Burke," said Andrea Sheldon of the Traditional Values Coalition.

For some Republican activists on the right, blaming Burke is an old pastime, though one that until lately they kept out of the papers. During last year's fight over health care, they blamed her for Dole's willingness to bargain over the Clinton plan long after most Republicans had turned against it. Some others around Washington suggest she was never committed to sweeping reform, but kept Dole identified with the idea to prevent Republicans from looking like diehard supporters of the existing system in the fall elections.

"Sheila Burke was the Republican executioner of Hillary Clinton's health-care bill," insists Democrat Lawrence O'Don-



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—PAUL WEYRICH

nell, who was then the Finance Committee's top staff member. "I saw the health-care saga last year as Hillary versus Sheila, and anyone who put their money on Hillary was crazy."

Burke notes pointedly that she has been a Republican longer than Dole's presidential rival Phil Gramm. And though her personal views still diverge from Dole's in some areas—she supports abortion rights, for example—Burke insists, "I'm not confused about his point of view and never tried to dissuade him from that point of view. Nor could I."

The attempt to tag Burke as a liberal also seems misguided to some Republicans who have worked most closely with her in the Senate. John McCain, an Arizona Senator of impeccable conservative credentials who has endorsed Gramm for President, credits Dole's chief of staff with rescuing the Arizona Senator's hard-line proposal for a line-item veto from such formidable adversaries as Budget Committee chairwoman Pete Domenici. "One way of getting your point across to Bob Dole is getting

your point across to Sheila, but that doesn't mean that she directs him. It means that he can rely on her," McCain says.

Burke's influence comes by virtue of the unique bond she and Dole have developed through the 18 years in which she has carried out his will on issues as monumental as national health care and as close to home as ways to create an energy industry from Kansas corn. He was a relatively junior member of the Finance Committee when he hired Burke as a health-care-policy specialist, and nine years later he made her chief of staff. Earlier this year, after he offered her the prestigious but largely symbolic job of secretary of the Senate, her critics thought Burke had been, in Weyrich's words, "put on ice."

Burke was tempted to take the appointment—in part, she says, so that she could spend more time with her husband, insurance executive David Chew, and their three small children, ages three, five and seven. (She managed to deliver two of them while the Senate was in recess.) But characteristically, she instead took on the job in addition to her other duties. The arrangement didn't work, so given the choice again, Burke returned to full-time policymaking as chief of staff.

In a culture of machismo and ego, McCain says, Burke relies on patience. "She has these endless meetings. They're so frustrating it's unbelievable. Everybody vents their spleen. Everybody plants their feet in concrete," he says. "And then she begins to talk, spelling out the principles that everyone wants to preserve. After a while, the issue ripens out, and people begin to come to consensus, but it's a very painful process."

That technique, however, hasn't worked on welfare reform, the Republicans' most ambitious social-policy effort—and an issue that for some of them is an ideological crusade as much as a policy question. "Sheila very clearly has an agenda," says staunchly conservative North Carolina Republican Lauch Faircloth, a Dole-for-President supporter who is virtually alone in the Senate in his willingness to criticize Burke on the record. "She lacks an understanding of what people want, and that is welfare reform, not just another federal program. It is a social problem that is destroying the country."

This was supposed to have been the week that the Senate Republicans put forward a reform of the welfare system that they had promised would be the show-piece of their new reign. Gingrich's steel-disciplined House had made it look easy by passing its measure in a mere four days last March. The Senate Finance Committee's more moderate version of the bill is so entangled in controversy, both ideological and economic, that Dole has twice

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YOUNG AT HEART

By WALTER MEARS

The Associated Press
WASHINGTON — Age as an issue can't be denied when it surfaces in a presidential campaign — but it can be deflected. Watch Bob Dole, who just turned 72 years old, as he runs overtime to become the oldest challenger ever to seek the nation's highest office.

His pace is unrelenting — in his campaign and in the day job as majority leader of the Senate, which also means working nights.

There's a campaign medical report, health being central to the age issue, and Dole's, his people say, is excellent. Dole's own diagnosis, when he began his third Republican presidential bid: "I'm in great health."

The Capitol physician agreed. "The patient is in excellent health with all medical conditions stable or controlled," Dr. John Eisold said in a report issued by the Dole campaign.

World War II wounds have denied him the use of his right arm for 50 years and are said to pain him still. He shakes hands with his left. He had surgery for prostate cancer in 1991; it was successful, and he said it made him a poster boy for testing and treatment for the disease.

He turned 72 Saturday. His birthday weekend was to be a relatively easy one. Morning at

home with his wife at their Wategate apartment, then off to Long Island resort near Southampton, N.Y. for two campaign fund-raising receptions, birthday cakes and celebrations with about 150 supporters. He was taking today off — not even a TV talk show, and that's rare. Almost half his Sundays in 1994 included at least one TV interview program, and he wasn't even campaigning then.

The positive side of age, of course, is experience. So the Kansas senator describes himself as seasoned. Tempered. Tested. Elected, he would at 73 take over for a president 23 years younger than he, a generation gap in reverse.

One of his allies, Gov. Jim Edgar of Illinois, said he had thought the age factor would be a problem for Dole but has since changed his view.

"I'm not sure it will be as much of an issue as I would have thought a year ago," Edgar said.

He said President Clinton has image problems over trust, and steady leadership, and that could be a plus for the elder candidate.

Dole would like to think so, and to persuade Republicans likewise. To that end, Dole claimed leadership credentials akin to Ronald Reagan's at a session of the Republican National Committee in Philadelphia — to rein in the gov-



GOP presidential candidate Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., works out on a treadmill in his Washington apartment.

ernment, reconnect with American values and reassert U.S. prestige and power wherever challenged.

"Some think I'm too young," he's said. "I've been willing to

put Strom Thurmond on the ticket for balance." The South Carolina senator is 92.

But age isn't slowing Dole or his frontrunner lead for 1996. But for all of that, the campaign is

just beginning. A weary outburst, a slip-up, a significant illness, and age could become an obstacle to Dole's last, best chance at the prize he's sought so long.

had to postpone sending it to the Senate floor. He now hopes to begin debate the week of Aug. 7.

As he does with most issues where his leadership is on the line, Dole has charged his chief of staff with working out the differences and finding a compromise that can carry the votes. One basic problem is that the bill has engendered a fight between competing regions. Its chief aim is to transform welfare from an entitlement—that is, a program in which Washington gives states enough money to pay benefits to everyone who is eligible—to one where funding is handed out in block grants of fixed sums. But as Sunbelt Senators contemplate dividing up an annual \$16.8 billion in welfare funding from Washington during the next five years, they are worried that the current formulas will shortchange their fast-growing states.

To conservatives, the more devilish issue is one of ideology, particularly on the question of curbing unwed pregnancy. "The welfare system is not going to be changed by taking money from New York and sending it to Texas," said David Mason, a congressional expert at the Heritage Foundation. "It might be changed by focusing on illegitimacy. That's why this is the more important fight."

Conservatives, led by Faircloth in the Senate, have accused Burke of trying to trip up their efforts to assure that the bill ties federal grants to states' performance in reducing their illegitimacy rates. They also complain that she has brushed aside their demand that it include language asserting that marriage is the foundation of a successful society. Says a congressional aide who has tangled with her: "She's notorious for rolling her eyes and glaring at you over her glasses whenever a conservative idea is expressed."

Burke contends it is hard to find a clear philosophical dividing line on the issue: whereas many religious groups want Washington to penalize women for giving birth out of wedlock and while they are teens, the Roman Catholic Church is fighting that move, concerned that it would increase the number of abortions. What's more, Republican Governors are resisting any federal conditions on the block grants, arguing, on venerable conservative grounds, that states best understand their own needs. "The support for those kinds of strings is not here," she insists.

And the support for Burke? If for conservatives her presence is becoming a test of Dole's commitment to their cause, her departure would be a sign to others that he is willing to cast off his past to win the support of people who have never much cared for him. Whatever Dole does will tell both sides—and voters in general—something essential about his character.