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■ POLITICS

Stomping on Principle

Clinton and Dole: Just because we said it doesn't mean we meant it

By NANCY GIBBS

ATONEMENT IS AN ANCIENT AND ARTFUL tradition in Washington, when politicians kneel to confess their faults and promise to sin no more. Maybe it was the example of hundreds of thousands of men converging on the capital in a call to genuine repentance that inspired President Clinton and Bob Dole to do some penance themselves last week. But in their case, the gestures of apology wound up looking more shameful than the original sin.

In what some Democrats now consider a pathological pattern, Clinton distanced himself from an achievement he had long defended: the 1993 budget deal he sold as a valiant attempt to cut the deficit, lower interest rates and make the tax system more progressive. What looked courageous two years ago was looking costly last week when Clinton stood before a well-heeled crowd of donors in Houston. And so he abandoned text and principle and ad-libbed a confession. "Probably there are people in this room still mad at me at that budget because you think I raised your taxes too much," he said. "It might surprise you to know I think I raised them too much too."

But it was not really my fault, the President explained. Clinton managed to blame the Republicans, even though they had voted unanimously against the budget plan, as well as members of his own party, even though he nearly twisted arms out of sockets to get their support. It was because the G.O.P. leaders refused to help him pass a leaner budget plan, Clinton suggested, that he was forced to make a deal with profligate Democrats to win the votes he needed.

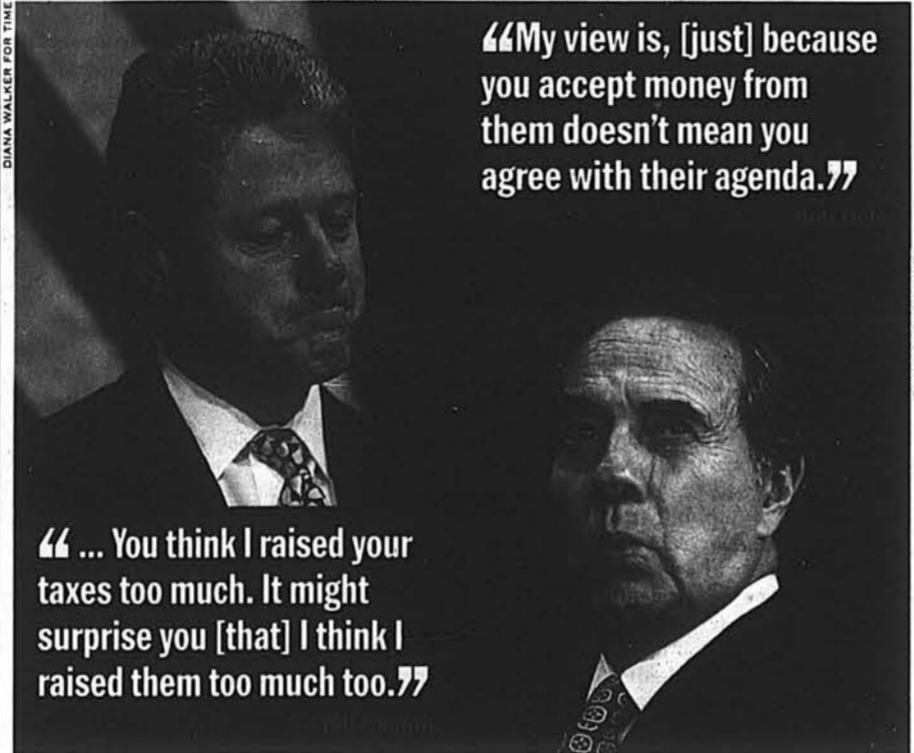
Never mind that his crusade had cost some fatally loyal Democrats their jobs. "I can't tell you what was on the President's mind," says Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky, the freshman Democrat who became notorious back home for casting the deciding vote and lost her seat as a result. "The only thing I can tell you is what he said to me on the night of the vote, and that was that without this, the country would have come to a screeching halt." And never mind that Clinton had actually proposed even more spending in his 1993 "stimulus package" and even bigger tax increases: \$359 billion, vs. the \$258 finally approved.

That was then, and this is campaign

1996; the President had found a theme, at least one to strum with a high-tax-bracket crowd. He had first marketed it a few days earlier during a speech in Williamsburg, Virginia, before the Business Roundtable. To get his plan through Congress, he told the corporate chieftains, he had to "raise your taxes more and cut spending less than I wanted to, which made a lot of you furious." He got away with it that time, taking credit for pushing through a brave budget without taking the blame for the very ingredients

battles with Newt Gingrich's bloodthirsty G.O.P. troops to endure a betrayal by their own President. "He can shove it," an angry House Democrat said in a closed-door meeting of the House Democratic Whip organization. "I've resigned myself to the fact that he won't stand [up] for anything."

From the Democrats' perspective, Clinton's flip-flop on taxes couldn't possibly have come at a worse time, when the Senate Finance Committee was passing a \$245 billion tax cut and the House was



"... You think I raised your taxes too much. It might surprise you [that] I think I raised them too much too."

"My view is, [just] because you accept money from them doesn't mean you agree with their agenda."

that made it brave in the first place. But sooner or later, he was bound to be cited for a moving violation. "We missed it," admitted a senior White House official, after Clinton went further in Houston. "We should have caught it, but we didn't."

With a little help from Reuter and the Washington Times, the G.O.P. certainly did; commercials were on the air by the end of the week. Republican Party chairman Haley Barbour correctly called Clinton's version of events "a preposterous fairy tale." But his gleeful indignation was nothing compared with the fury of Democrats on the Hill, who were too bruised from their

pushing through its plan to downsize Medicare by \$270 billion. Though Clinton has vowed to veto the Medicare bill, Democrats in Congress have no faith he will stand firm a few weeks from now, when either a deal gets made or the government shuts down for lack of money. At that point, they predict, the President will buckle and accept a plan that hits the Democrats' core constituencies: the elderly, the poor, labor, minorities.

Some Democrats thought they spotted the fingerprints of Clinton's stealth G.O.P. adviser Dick Morris, who brought to the White House the theory that Clinton, a New Democrat reformer, was elected President

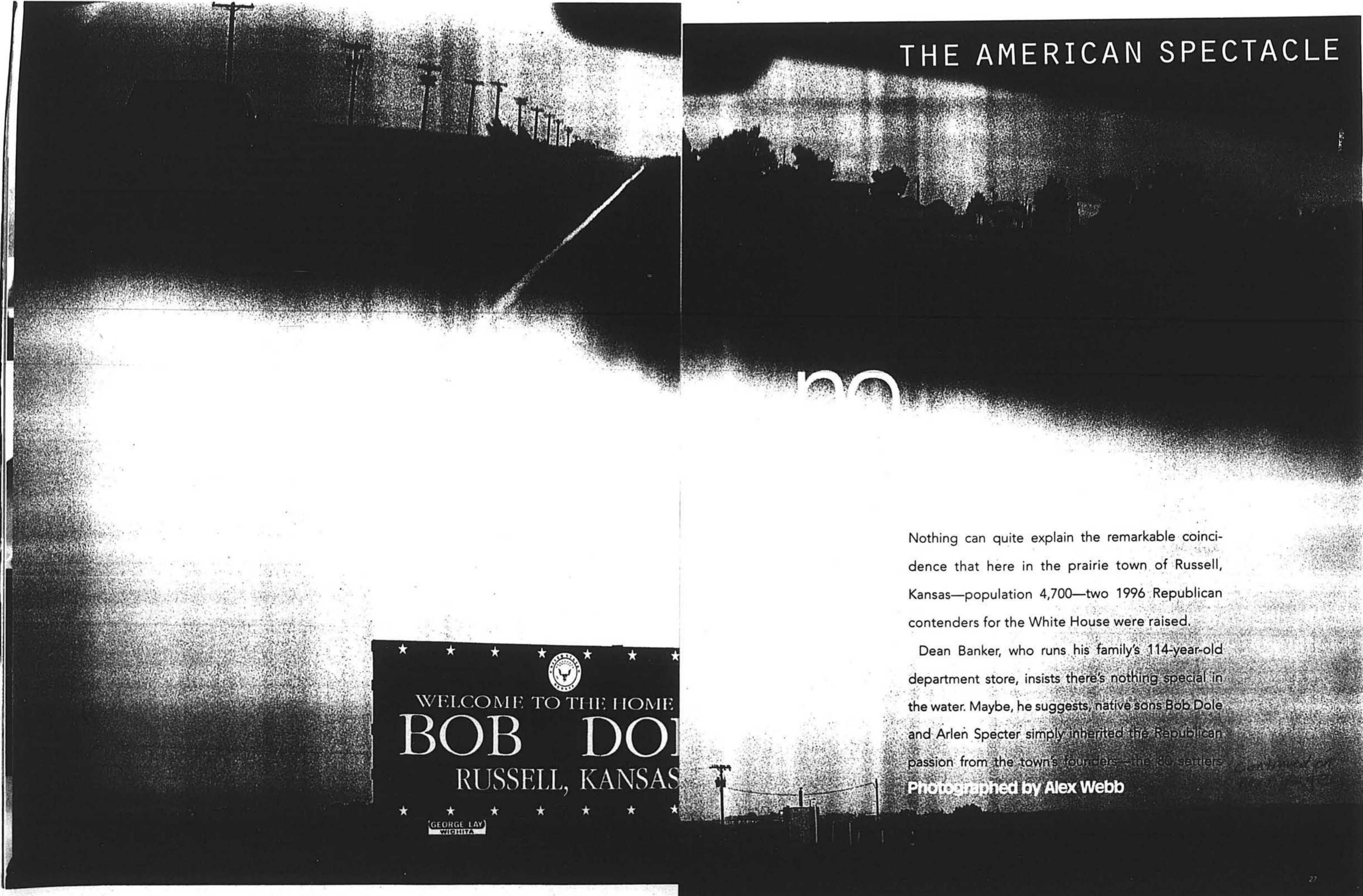
only to have his body snatched on arrival in Washington by the Democratic cavemen leading Congress. To win in '96, the theory goes, Clinton needs to restore his centrist soul and create some distance between his politics and his party. "Triangulation," it is called among his advisers, though on the Hill the preferred term is "stratagulation."

The disgust in Congress and the prospect of headlines about the Return of the Waffler were enough to send Clinton somersaulting again in a press conference. He argued that he did not actually regret the tax hike he had just renounced. What he meant to say, he painfully explained, was that nobody likes raising taxes. And if he was misunderstood, if his listeners could not get the subtlety of his argument, then he should not have said it. Though this was not much comfort to his allies on Capitol Hill, Clinton spokesman Mike McCurry maintains that congressional Democrats should stop whining. "It works for them to be against the Republican plan," McCurry says. "They don't have to have a plan themselves. But that's not good enough for the President of the U.S. They don't realize Clinton has bought them a lot of space by making a powerful argument against the Republican Medicare cuts. They should grow up."

For the beleaguered Democrats, the only consolation in the spectacle of Clinton teetering on the balance beam was the sight of Bob Dole throwing out his back on the uneven bars. Having months ago pandered to his party's right flank by returning a contribution from a gay Republican group, Dole astonished both friends and foes Tuesday by announcing to Ohio reporters that he was going to accept the contribution after all. Dole's campaign manager Scott Reed had returned the contribution from the Log Cabin Republicans in August, a campaign insider explained, in the belief that once conservatives found out about it and complained, he would have to reject it anyway. So he acted early to avoid any messy headlines. Now here was Dole reversing the decision, blaming his staff for the "mistake" and tidying up in a Clinton-like way: he would take the money after all, Dole said, but he would not take any more.

Republicans grumbled that Dole can hardly dub Clinton an invertebrate while he himself wiggles between principles. In a Wall Street Journal essay, Gingrich booster and political augur Arianna Huffington called Clinton a "counterfeit" and Dole a "composite—a collage of positions determined by polling data and focus groups," and predicted that in a matchup, the counterfeit would win. The idea of that choice helps explain why voters tired of gamey party politics ache for the only candidate who has yet to say whether he belongs to a party at all. —Reported by James Carney, Michael Duffy and Karen Tumulty/Washington

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THE AMERICAN SPECTACLE

no

WELCOME TO THE HOME
BOB DOLE
RUSSELL, KANSAS

GEORGE LAY
PHOTOGRAPHY

Nothing can quite explain the remarkable coincidence that here in the prairie town of Russell, Kansas—population 4,700—two 1996 Republican contenders for the White House were raised.

Dean Banker, who runs his family's 114-year-old department store, insists there's nothing special in the water. Maybe, he suggests, native sons Bob Dole and Arlen Specter simply inherited the Republican passion from the town's founders—the 80 settlers

Photographed by Alex Webb