

Revolution or business as usual?

10 Years of Republican Rule

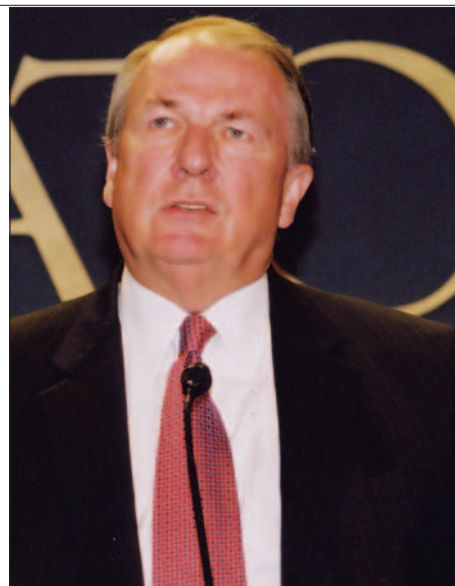
The congressional elections of 1994 were the most important midterm elections in modern American history. The Republican Party, buoyed by the unpopularity of President Clinton's health care plan, captured the House of Representatives for the first time in four decades. The Senate also fell into Republican hands. The Republican Revolution, as the election came to be known, was widely seen as a victory for limited government. House Republican candidates ran on the "Contract with America," a campaign manifesto that promised to reduce the size of government with such policies as tax cuts and welfare reform. Cato published its first edition of the *Cato Handbook for Congress* to capitalize on the sudden popularity of limited-government ideas on Capitol Hill.

At a May 20 Cato conference, "The Republican Revolution 10 Years Later: Smaller Government or Business As Usual?" former speaker Newt Gingrich, a key architect of the GOP's 1994 victory, described how he began laying groundwork for a Republican majority as early as 1978, when he was first elected to Congress. The Republican leadership at the time, he said, was comfortable in the minority and didn't seriously expect to take control of Congress any time soon. Gingrich urged his colleagues to take a more unified and adversarial posture. In preparation for the 1994 election, he helped to write the "Contract with America," which was signed by all Republican candidates and drew clear contrasts with the Democratic majority.

A key Gingrich ally and "Contract" coauthor was Dick Arme, who was elected majority leader by the new Republican majority. He argued that only the obstinacy of the Democratic leadership could have ignited the intense backlash of 1994. The Democratic majority wouldn't even allow the popular provisions of the "Contract" to come to the House floor for a vote, Arme noted.

Immediately after the election, Arme said, the Republican caucus experienced an unusual amount of unity among rank-and-file members grateful to be in the majority for the first time in 40 years. However, he said, not all Republican members were limited-government conservatives, and over time moderate Republicans became restive. That made the job of the leadership increas-

At Cato's conference "The Republican Revolution 10 Years Later: Smaller Government or Business As Usual?" Cato president Edward H. Crane traces the decline of limited-government ideas in the Republican Party back before the 1994 election. He said that Ronald Reagan's nonideological reelection campaign in 1984 and the nomination of George Bush in 1988 were major missed opportunities.



Former House speaker Newt Gingrich argued that the reversal of a 70-year trend toward bigger government would take far more than 10 years and that both the Reagan administration and the "Contract with America" Congress had made real progress toward limited government. Former House majority leader Dick Arme said that it was the Democratic Congress's refusal even to vote on "Contract" provisions in 1994 that led to the big Republican victory that November.

ingly difficult. Such ideological decline is inevitable, given the difficulties inherent in building a majority coalition, Arme said.

Thomas Edsall of the *Washington Post* argued that the Republican Congress has abandoned its principles over the last decade, pointing to rising spending and the passage of campaign finance reform as major retreats. Rampant pork and arrogant treatment of the Democratic minority show that the Republicans have failed to live up to the ideals that made them the majority in the first place, he charged.

Gingrich countered that although the Republican Congress failed to enact a comprehensive limited-government agenda, it did as well as could be expected, given the many obstacles it faced, including a politically savvy President Clinton, dissent within the ranks of the GOP, and the need to satisfy the various parts of the conservative coalition.

Cato president Ed Crane traced the ideological decline of the Republican Party much further back than the 104th Congress. The substance-free Reagan reelection campaign of 1984 and the decision to nominate George Bush—a man not known for his commitment to the Goldwater tradition of limited government—in 1988 were major missed opportunities, he said. He warned that the Republican Party's current penchant for spending and reckless interventionism threatens to undermine the GOP's commitment to limited government.

Other panelists examined the GOP record in specific policy areas in more detail. Cato's Dan Griswold argued that the Republican Congress has a positive but modest record on free trade. David Salisbury, director of Cato's Center for Educational Freedom, criticized the Republican Congress for

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expanding the federal role in education rather than abolishing the Department of Education as earlier Republican platforms had pledged to do. Jerry Taylor said that some well-meaning regulatory reforms were enacted but that those reforms have been largely ignored by the bureaucracies they were designed to tame.

The first few months of 1995 were heady times for advocates of limited government. But the euphoria was not to last. In recent years, business as usual seems to have reasserted itself in the capital. It seems that the revolutionaries of 1994 have, as do most politicians, become comfortable in their new role as the establishment party.

Papers from the conference will be published in a book, edited by Chris Edwards and John Samples, in January 2005. ■