

ROLL CALL

Right Emboldened for 109th

February 7, 2005

*By Ben Pershing,
Roll Call Staff*

BALTIMORE — In late 1994, newly elected Members of the House GOP gathered here for their freshman retreat, holding a dinner at Camden Yards to celebrate their historic capture of the majority.

Last Thursday night, many of those same Republican lawmakers assembled for another dinner at Oriole Park, this time in the warehouse behind the right-field bleachers. For those in attendance, the dinner was a chance to marvel at their continued electoral ascendance and at how little they knew in those early days.

"If you'd asked me in 1994 if conservatives would have been this strong a decade later, I would never have thought so," said House Republican Policy Chairman John Shadegg (Ariz.).

Shadegg is the former chairman of the Republican Study Committee, and the occasion for this year's trip to Baltimore was the Conservative Members Retreat, an event hosted by the RSC and the Heritage Foundation.

About 50 GOP lawmakers were in attendance at the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront (all House Members except for Alabama Sen. Jeff Sessions) for three days of seminars and panel discussions on subjects ranging from budget reform to gay marriage to Social Security.

Permeating all the discussions was a newfound sense of confidence, bordering on cockiness, that is a natural outgrowth of the GOP's ability to repeatedly hold the majority and now the White House.

Heritage Foundation President Edwin Feulner said that in the roughly 30 years that he has been hosting or visiting various conservative retreats, "the mood here is better, more positive. ... Management theorists talk about PMAs — positive mental attitudes — and that's what you've got here."

But for some conservative lawmakers, that confidence is tempered by a sense of wariness, particularly as Congress and the White House haltingly lurch toward a possible agreement on reforming Social Security.

Many of these Members have had plenty of experience with "triangulation," watching in the 1990s as President Bill Clinton cut deals that angered liberal Democrats. More recently, a significant number of conservatives either voted against or were profoundly uncomfortable with President Bush's signature initiatives, the No Child Left Behind education measure and the Medicare prescription drug bill.

On Social Security, current RSC Chairman Mike Pence (Ind.) said, "We don't want to come to a point where at the end of the debate what was offered as reform ends up as an enormous enlargement of the program."

But Pence, who voted against both NCLB and the Medicare bill, sounded cautiously optimistic that history would not repeat itself on Social Security reform.

"I think the times are different," he said. "The sense I have is that the White House is doing what they've done on bills that have captured the enthusiasm of conservatives in the past."

Pence said the assembled RSC members were able to reach a consensus on a handful of broad Social Security principles, the first being the need for "big personal retirement accounts," possibly funded with 6 percent of individuals' current payroll tax contributions rather than the 4 percent advocated by the White House.

The second area of agreement was that there should be no net tax increase, no value-added tax and no increase in the current \$90,000 payroll cap for Social Security taxes. Conservative Members also agreed that the final legislative package should reflect the will of the "majority of the majority," and that winning Democratic votes shouldn't be a goal or a requirement.

Significantly, the lawmakers also expressed broad support for the idea that the House should move a Social Security package first rather than waiting for the Senate to move. Even Sessions, the only Senator in attendance, conceded that order "may well be the best way to do it."

That point was emphasized by ex-House Majority Leader Dick Armey (Texas), who spoke during Thursday night's dinner and told House Members that if they really want to move forward on an aggressive agenda — whether on Social Security, tort reform or other issues — they should not wait for the Senate to act first.

That advice is particularly relevant now, as House Republican leaders mull whether they should let the other chamber tackle Social Security reform before they do. The benefit of such a strategy is that it would allow leaders to see whether a reform package had the votes to pass in the Senate before they ask their own Members to take a politically perilous vote.

The downside, though, is that going second would rob House Republicans of the chance to put the first stamp on the issue and frame the debate, presumably on more conservative terms than the Senate would.

Armey wasn't the only star guest speaker. Prison Fellowship Ministries Founder Charles Colson made remarks on human rights issues. Majority Leader Tom DeLay (Texas) delivered a Friday luncheon speech on the House agenda, followed by an address from ex-Speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.) that was mostly about his new book.

"It was a classic Newt presentation," said freshman Rep. Patrick McHenry (N.C.). "I don't know if he took a breath during his 45-minute talk."

With Bush's fiscal 2006 spending blueprint due today, conservatives spent much of their time mulling the best way to affect the budget process. Rep. Jeb Hensarling (Texas) led a lengthy discussion on budget issues and fiscal discipline, and Members expressed a desire to take another crack at budget process reform, despite the fact that a reform package failed dramatically on the House floor last year.

One novel reform idea that surfaced during the discussions in Baltimore was that of a House-only line-item veto. The proposal, still only in discussion stages, would call for all earmarks, particularly in Appropriations conference reports, to be written as individual line items so that conservatives could seek to amend them out when they reach the floor.

Those budget reform concepts, as well as broad calls to halt the growth of federal spending,

sounded in their scope more akin to the goals of the GOP class of 1994 than those of more recent classes. McHenry, who at 29 is the youngest Member of Congress, enthusiastically agreed that the comparison to the GOP's last Baltimore visit is apt.

"Ten years later ... Republicans came back here to reignite the revolution," he said.

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