



# Armey's Divisions

by Tom Bethell

Inside the Cannon Office Building, the old tenants had left but the newcomers had not yet arrived. The movers were evidently expected at any moment. Cardboard boxes marked "House of Representatives" were piled eight-feet high in hallways; upended desks and inverted chairs were jammed into corridors, canvas carts filled with old Federal Registers were ready to roll. Office doors were firmly shut, old nameplates still in place: Here, for example, was Michael Huffington's one-term abode. In the new House there will be eighty-six new congressmen. Half of the total membership will have been elected since 1990.

In a vast caucus room on the third floor, the D.C. government's Department of Employment Services was advising out-of-work congressional staffers on résumé preparation, job openings, and "job search techniques." About 200 people had shown up, female minorities mostly. They were standing patiently in different lines, while a woman behind a podium gave advice on form-filling. "Stress management" for "dislocated workers" was among the services provided.

Down the hall one congressional office was open, and a young man sitting beside the front desk was taking envelopes from one pile, slitting them open, and placing them in another pile without removing the contents. Every minute or so he answered the phone. "Congressman Dick Armey's office..."

First elected in 1984, Armey, 54, represents the suburbs of north Dallas. Now he will be the new House majority leader. When he arrived in Washington, he slept in a cot in the House gymnasium until Speaker Tip O'Neill turned him out. Then he slept on his office couch.

*Tom Bethell is The American Spectator's Washington correspondent.*

He grew up in North Dakota, and by the age of 18 was working as a utility lineman. Two high school teachers had advised him to forget about college, but one crisp night, 30 degrees below zero and 30 feet above ground, he decided to try for it anyway. Indoor work! He graduated from Jamestown College, received a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Oklahoma, and later joined the faculty of North Texas State (now the University of North Texas).

He became chairman of an economics department that "cherished its Marxist traditions," but as he admired the free market, and Ludwig von Mises in particular, he soon became disillusioned. Tenure actually diminishes academic freedom, he says today, and faculty governance is the principal cause of the decay of the academy. Academic politics soon became too vicious for him, so he sought out the relative tranquillity of the U.S. Congress. Ten years later, he is near the top of that pole.

He soon came in with his assistant, Edward Gillespie. Armey is a six-footer with what looks like a suntan. His private office lacks the usual "power wall"—framed photos of Himself with Presidents Past. His father's spurs and saddle blanket are on display, and there's a framed page from *The Spirit of Enterprise* inscribed by George Gilder. He is a man interested in ideas, and as such seems not terribly interested in his material surroundings. He also conveys a sense of diffidence, almost of not quite believing what has happened to him. There's something, surely, that the press has overlooked here. To have become majority leader without opposition suggests unheralded diplomatic skills, for one thing.

He has been accused of shrillness. "Dick Armey is going to find himself a nonplayer," Rep. Mike Synar of Oklahoma told *Business Week* in 1993.

"He's too shrill and has absolutely no effectiveness." Synar himself is a goner now, beaten in the Democratic primary by a retired schoolteacher whose campaign consisted of slipping his business card under windshield wipers. Armey told President Bush that reneging on his no-new-taxes pledge would make him a one-term president, and he told President Clinton much the same thing. Probably that's what they mean by shrill.

Sitting in his own office, Armey asked me if I would mind if he smoked a cigarette. He had just thought of an epigram: "Conservatives believe it when they see it. Liberals see it when they believe it." Ideology enables liberals to "see" the evidence for whatever they believe: that government can solve all problems, for example. When programs fail, more money must be spent. His psychologist wife would call it "projection." Conservatives base their beliefs on evidence. What's interesting here is that the new majority goes around pondering the ideological mindset of his opponents: a big change from earlier GOP leadership. I asked him how big a change had we just seen.

"It's really a massive change," he said. Conservatives had made the mistake of thinking that power lay with the presidency. Democrats all along had controlled spending, legislation, government programs—the agenda, in short. So there would be change now? I reminded him of what he well knew, that since the Depression government control over the economy has never really been rolled back. It's always hard to believe that one lives at the cusp of real change. Government has been a one-way ratchet, Armey said, because "the program is perceived more clearly than its cost." It's easier to see what we get than what we pay. That's why he favors a flat-tax, which "reveals clearly the cost of government to those who pay it."

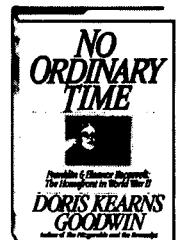
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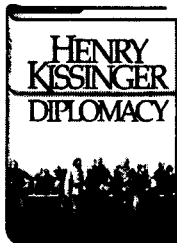
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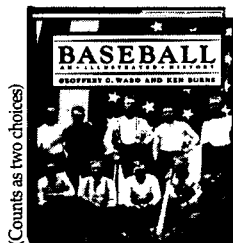
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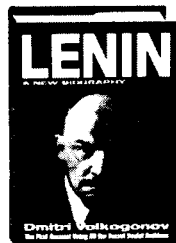
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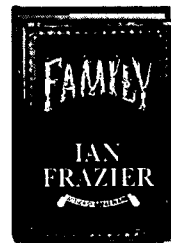
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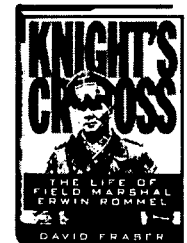
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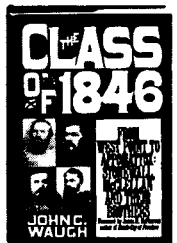
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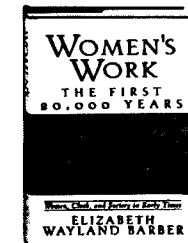
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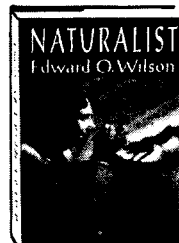
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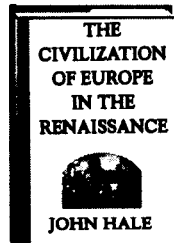
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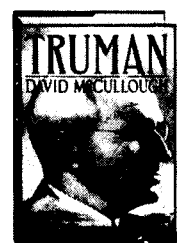
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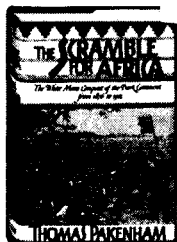
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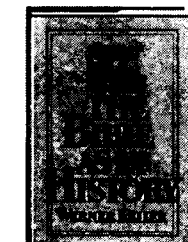
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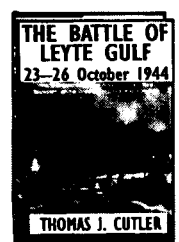
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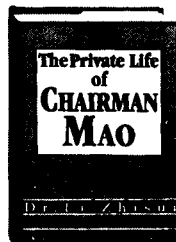
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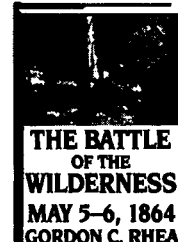
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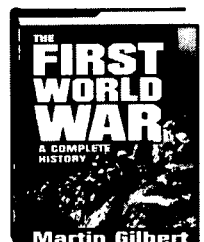
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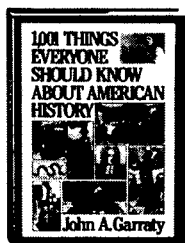
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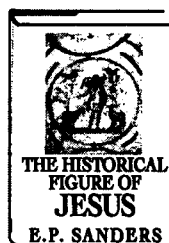
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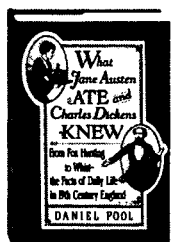
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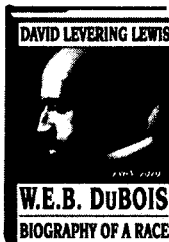
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build this welfare-regulatory state. I believe we can build it down in less than forty years, but it will be long, hard work. I also believe that if we try to go too far and too fast to the right, we run into the same problem Clinton did when he tried to make one lump-sum jump to the left. People want change, but in moderation. Look at the Democrats. Gradualism is the way they've gone. I don't mean to be timid now. But we need to understand that it will be a long, steady haul. Sprinters don't finish marathons, and this is a marathon task we've got before us."

**H**e does see one or two early victories. Taxes, for one. "I believe we will get most if not all of the contract provisions for tax reduction through the Congress, to the president's desk, and signed," he said. "Including capital gains with 50 percent exclusion and indexing." By 1997 he expects to see a "massive tax restructuring." He does not expect that his flat (17 percent) tax proposal will come to the floor before then. His strategy is to "sell it to America first" (through talk radio mostly) and then let representatives bring it back to Washington.

Two weeks earlier, Katharine Graham of the *Washington Post* had invited about eighty people to a dinner for Charlie Peters, who founded the *Washington Monthly* twenty-five years ago. As a former editor I was present, and it was a rare pleasure to spend the evening with so many (neo) liberals. One comment I heard two or three times, and read several times more in the following week, was that Clinton "should have done welfare before health care." I laid this piece of Beltway wisdom at Dick Armey's feet. "The liberals are saying they should have done welfare before health care."

In 1993, he replied, almost a hundred Democratic congressmen, including powerful committee chairmen, sent Clinton a very public letter saying: If you push a welfare reform bill like the one you described in your campaign ("end welfare as we know it"), we will not only stop welfare reform but your health-care plan as well. "Within a week," Armey recalled, "the president announced that he would do welfare after health care."

Anyway, the time for welfare reform has come at last. The Republicans are geared up, and the vast social-worker establishment will be getting ready to transmute "reform" into a subtle expan-

sion of the system (as happened in 1988). Horrid traps lie ahead for Republicans, and it is not clear that Rep. Clay Shaw of Florida, in line to head the relevant Ways and Means subcommittee, sees them. The Contract With America calls for "a tough two years and out provision with work requirements to promote individual responsibility," for example. "Work requirements" could lead to a government jobs program or a vast array of training programs that will employ tens of thousands of new social workers: one more victory for the caring professions, the facilitators, the coordinators, and the stress managers. What does Armey think?

"Of all the things that are in the contract package, the one that I consider most dynamic and changeable is welfare reform; I am careful how I describe it. We know we have a contract to bring that bill to a vote, and that will happen. But I am not predicting an outcome. That is going to be a very fascinating process."

It is indeed, and readers who want to follow the play without a scorecard should remember this: the welfare establishment over the last thirty years has been handed no defeats and has excellent news media connections. If you do not see in the headlines or hear on evening news loud howling and wailing and bitter accusations about hardhearted callousness, assume that the system is set for one more quiet expansion. It is doubtful that the problem can be solved nationally. The only promising solution is the restoration of autonomy to the states. If that happens, the federal judiciary will almost certainly emerge as the last line of defense for the status quo.

**A** week after the election, Armey got into a little trouble for something he said about term limits on National Public Radio. If Republicans can "straighten out the House," he said, making it function "democratically" and "efficiently," maybe Americans will find "their enthusiasm for term limits waning." He also said (as NPR did not broadcast) that limits would come up for a vote and that he would vote for it. Term limits "lock us into a reform Congress," he told me. But he's not entirely happy with the idea either. Having to support term limits is "a sad position for a person who loves the Constitution," he says. It is "the saddest position I take in politics." Meaning? "If

the House of Representatives had always functioned the way it was intended to function," there probably would be no interest in term limits.

Maybe, but Congress is organized to vote money out of some people's pockets and into others', and as long as this continues term limits will be needed. However the Supreme Court rules, nothing short of a constitutional amendment will suffice: states that do not vote for limits will accumulate seniority at the expense of those who do. All congressmen of whatever party who vote against term limits should be targeted for defeat. Armey, incidentally, thinks it is "problematic" whether they will pass.

How about farm subsidies? The *Dallas Morning News* reported that, after the election, Armey had a talk with Rep. Pat Roberts of Kansas, incoming chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. An aide to Roberts said that Armey "agreed that with his new duties he is going to remove himself from the agriculture subsidy debate and let Mr. Roberts, who has the experience, deal with the farm bill." Armey's aide Ed Gillespie said that Armey "did not agree to remove himself from the debate," but did agree that he no longer has the time to make the issue "the legislative priority it has been in the past."

Armey told me: "The first thing I do as majority leader is recognize that we have a whole new Agriculture Committee; and that my job initially is to let that committee produce a product and then evaluate it; and do all the necessary work to facilitate that committee bringing its agenda to the floor." When the bill comes to the floor, he added: "I reserve my right as an individual member to hold my amendments against it." But this does not mean "I have changed my attitude about what is sound public policy."

In sum, these cautious remarks should not be taken to imply that Armey has changed—"grown." They reflect his new position. "I don't speak solely for Dick Armey anymore," he has said. As majority leader, he speaks "for the party." He also knows how difficult it will be to change a system that has endured without challenge for forty years. Armey would like to change the system. But without a real change in incentives—such as term limits would provide—it is safe to say that the institutional memory and momentum of Congress will be very difficult to overcome. □



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# The Second Reagan Revolution

*With the voters' rejection of a liberal activist presidency, it is up to the Republican Congress to meet their expectations. This time, the GOP will not have the Cold War and a Carterized economy to keep it from doing the right thing.*

by Terry Eastland



*Government tends to grow; government programs take on weight and momentum, as public servants say, always with the best of intentions, "What greater service we could render if only we had a little more money and a little more power." But the truth is that outside of its legitimate function, government does nothing as well or as economically as the private sector . . .*

—Ronald Reagan  
October 27, 1964

Ronald Reagan spoke those words thirty years ago on behalf of then-presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, but for the new Republican Congress, they are, as the preacher might say, a text—a text that declares a problem and implies a solution. Government's tendency to grow is the problem; limiting government so that it fits "its legitimate function" is the solution. When President Reagan talked about cutting spending, he typically pointed to "waste, fraud, and abuse"—as though savings in these areas alone could balance the budget. Under Reagan's presidency, government at least did not grow. Federal spending, as a percentage of gross domestic product, was roughly the same (22 percent) when Reagan left office as when he was first sworn in—a polite way of saying that he stunned but did not slay the beast. Citing this failure, David Stockman wrote a book subtitled "Why the Reagan Revolution Failed." The new Republican Congress now has the chance to prove Stockman wrong.

Of course, Reagan had other things to do, and in fact he did not really *take on* big government. He was bound to defeat the "Evil Empire" of the Soviet Union, and that goal required increased defense spending. He also inherited a miserable economy, and tried to revive it with income tax rate cuts and tight

*Terry Eastland is the editor of Forbes MediaCritic and a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.*