Republicans Should Put on a Happy Face

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Republicans should look at the cheerful side of the 1998 election. It was really a great victory because it has enabled Republican Members of Congress to dump their so-called "leadership" that has been floundering with one failed strategy after another ever since becoming the majority in 1995.

This is not a conflict between conservatives and liberals. It's the difference between those who have vision and demand performance versus those who merely want to enjoy the perks of power by letting Bill Clinton deal from the bottom of the deck.

When the Republican Congress was elected in 1994 for the first time in 42 years, it had a clear mandate to end the era of Big Government, to cut taxes by stopping mischievous and wasteful spending, and to address the real problems in health care. The so-called Republican "leadership" failed on all counts.

One would think that the Republican "leadership" would have learned its lesson when Clinton outmaneuvered them in the end-of-the session game of "chicken" in 1995, but they walked into exactly the same trap in 1998. In declining to reelect Gingrich as Speaker, the Republican Members, left to right, obviously remember the axiom "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me."

Steve Frank, president of the National Federation of Republican Assemblies, aptly described the 1998 political campaign as suffering from the "Seinfeld Syndrome" -- it was a campaign about nothing. When the so-called "leadership" tried to nationalize the 1998 campaign, they just nationalized the fact that they had no message.

They had punted to Ken Starr in the vain hope that he was doing their work for them and that the 1998 elections would be a referendum on Clinton. It turned out to be a referendum on Congress.

The $10 million anti-Clinton television spots run in the last week of the campaign were too little, too late,

too soft, too patently political, and too easy a target for the media's counterattack. The millions of dollars of television spots aired earlier this fall bragged mainly about the 104th Congress (1995-96), since there was so little in the 105th (1997-98) worth advertising.

The Republican Congressional "leadership" didn't lead on anything except in surrendering to Clinton's demands. Almost everything Clinton wanted he got, because the Republican leadership had decided that they would only pass bills that Clinton assured them in advance he would sign.

The Republican "leadership" defaulted on the two major issues that voters care about: education and health care. Those ought to be Republican issues because they are prime examples of liberal attempts to impose socialistic control over our private lives.

The Republican "leadership" allowed Clinton and the Democrats to coopt these issues and demagogue about his extravagant and intrusive plans. The Republicans appeared to offer just a cheapskate version of the "compassionate" Democratic plan.

Instead of returning the budget surplus to the American people in tax refunds (as the State of Missouri does), the Republican Congress let Clinton harangue us that he "saved" the surplus for Social Security. He didn't save it at all; he demanded (and the Republican "leadership" okayed) the spending of $29 billion over last year's budget caps, almost $2 billion extra for the frolic in Bosnia, and $18 billion to be laundered through the International Monetary Fund and into the secret bank accounts of corrupt foreign dictators.

Instead of the insulting $8 per person tax-cut crumb that the Republican Congress deigned to give us, they should have passed an across-the-board tax cut that helps all taxpayers, abolished the marriage penalty, and repealed the 1993 Clinton-Gore tax increase and the 1990 George Bush tax increase. The Republican "leadership" failed even to raise the tax-cut issue.

The omnibus appropriations bill, with its dozens of pork-barrel projects, allowed newspaper headlines to proclaim: "The Era of Big Government Remains." Yet Congress failed to give us the anti-missile defense that we urgently need to protect American lives against Chinese missiles whose accuracy has been sharpened by U.S. technology, courtesy of Clinton's campaign finance shenanigans.

The 4,000-page omnibus appropriations bill was put together by three men: Newt Gingrich, Trent Lott, and Erskine Bowles negotiating for the President. There was nothing democratic about the process; no

votes were allowed on the many controversial issues it included.

The Senate was the graveyard of several good measures passed by the House, including the bill to deploy an anti-missile defense as soon as possible, the bill to override Clinton's veto of the ban on partial birth abortions, and the bill to cut funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. The Senate "leadership" rushed through confirmations of Clinton's activist judges, including 17 in the last hours of the 105th Congress without any roll-call vote.

The 64 House Republicans and 20 Senate Republicans who voted No on the omnibus appropriations bill are looking for new leaders with principle, conviction, and courage. In the words of a once-popular song, "Will everyone here kindly Step To the Rear and let a leader show the way."