
With Friends Like These: What's the First Job of Conservative Journalists?

Robert D. Novak

Robert Novak writes “Inside Report,” one of the nation’s longest-running syndicated newspaper columns, and is co-host of the Evans and Novak interview program on CNN.

A native of Illinois, he began his journalism career at the Joliet Herald-News and the Champaign-Urbana Courier while he was attending the University of Illinois. After serving in the army during the Korean War, he joined the Associated Press, which sent him to Washington, D.C., in 1957 to cover Congress. He joined the Wall Street Journal in 1958 as its Senate correspondent and political reporter, and later chief congressional correspondent.

In 1963 Robert Novak and Rowland Evans Jr. teamed up and wrote “Inside Report” together for thirty years. Novak now continues the column, which is carried by more than 150 newspapers across the country.

He is the author or coauthor of four books and appears regularly on television to discuss the political scene.

Novak spoke to an American Experiment audience in June 1998. His subject was whether the role of conservative journalists—specifically opinion journalists, who are expected to express a point of view—is to lead or critique the conservative movement.

In Washington, I am known by friends and foes alike as the Prince of Darkness, as somebody who usually sees a glass as half empty rather than half full—and that, indeed, is the function of a journalist.

My subject here has been framed so that instead of attacking the political establishment, as I usually do, I'm defending myself as a conservative journalist.

A few days ago, in response to that day's syndicated column running in the Washington Post, I got a call from a Republican leader of Congress whom I have known for twenty-five years—a man I admire and consider a friend. He was in a state of absolute consternation about my column.

I had written a report—and nobody has denied its accuracy—that Representative John Kasich, chairman of the House Budget Committee, had crafted a very cautious budget with one area of daring: he was moving cautiously to give some of the surplus that is accumulating in the Social Security system back to the American people as a tax cut.

Kasich was approached by Representative Mark Neumann, an eager, aggressive young second-term Republican congressman from Wisconsin who at the time was running for the Senate. Neumann said that if Kasich went through with that budget, using the surplus for tax cuts, he, Neumann, would go to the floor of the House of Representatives and say that the Republican budget was threatening his widowed mother's future security: She's sixty-seven now; when she's eighty-three, in the year 2014, the baby boomers will have eaten up all the

money and there won't be any left for her, he said. He won't tolerate that.

When you have a ten-vote majority in the House of Representatives and most of them are running for their lives, it's scary to have a conservative Republican saying that. Kasich buckled and took the provision out.

In my column, I used this as an example of how the Republicans have retreated on this and other matters, and I finished with the following, which had really upset my early-morning caller: "Certainly, President Clinton has captured the initiative with Republicans heeding his dictate not to touch the surplus for tax cuts. Speaker Gingrich has given no consistent guidance. A massive cigarette tax is in prospect. Do these people deserve to stay in the majority?"

My caller had three serious problems with this. Number one, he said, "Why don't you guys who are observers of the scene get into the arena?"

If I had a dollar for every politician who has quoted Teddy Roosevelt on getting into the arena, I would be a very rich man.

Number two, he said, "Why don't you write about the Democrats? They're terrible. They want to spend, they want to regulate, they want to control our lives. Why do you criticize your friends?" As a matter of fact, I write about three columns critical of President Clinton for each one critical of the Republicans, but the conservatives take that for granted.

His third question had to do with the question I had posed: "Do these people deserve to stay in the majority?"

“That’s an open question,” I said.

“Do you really think we’d be better off with Speaker Dick Gephardt, Majority Leader David Bonior, or Charlie Rangel—horror of horrors—as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee?”

I said, courageously, “I don’t know.”

“I can’t believe that,” he said.

That sets the stage for what I want to talk about here.

Tackling the Team

Contrary to the tales told by people who say I used to be a liberal Democrat and was seduced by the power of the right, I come from a Republican family and always have been a Republican. I’ve been a reporter most of my life, and I’ve been a columnist for over thirty-five years. As my column took on a more ideological tone, I began drifting gently, irrevocably, steadily to the right. Is there any more room out there? We’ll see.

There are so few journalists of the right that it distresses my friends when I seem to be criticizing them more than criticizing the enemy. Here are a few examples of what I’ve written this year:

On March 26: “Term-limits hypocrisy has been confronted. No longer can GOP candidates ride popular support for an issue they really oppose. The term-limits movement has proved that it is no handmaiden of the Republican Party.”

On April 20: “Behind President Clinton’s declaration that the era of big government is over, he fosters creeping nationalization, while Repub-

licans respond with a mixture of apathy and conciliation.”

On May 4: “These changes tacitly acknowledge failure of the 1998 election year strategy by congressional Republicans: block President Clinton’s legislative initiatives while not attempting anything very serious on their own.”

On May 11: “Since Republicans retreated from across-the-board tax reduction, their shrunken agenda now consists mainly of attacks on ‘criminal’ activities by the president. The GOP tacitly has bought into Clinton’s clever campaign to expand government’s role through incremental proposals.”

This is particularly galling to Republicans because they say there are so few conservative journalists. I sit with Fred Barnes of *The Weekly Standard* at the Washington Wizards basketball games, and since the Wizards are usually losing, we sometimes talk politics. One day we named as many conservative journalists as we could. Out of the three or four thousand working journalists in Washington, we could not get to twenty conservatives. Polls show that over 90 percent of the journalists in Washington voted for Bill Clinton in the last election. He won, but I don’t think he won by 90 percent of the vote.

These journalists are a very secular group, and they do not believe very much in the free enterprise system; they do have great faith in government. Token network and newspaper journalists are labeled conservative, but all the other journalists are not

labeled liberal—they are simply on the correct side.

Republican politicians say to me, “There are so few of you. Why are you criticizing us?” Early this year, I got a call from a Senate Republican leader who was enraged at something I had written. He said, “The trouble with you, Novak, is that you are so used to tackling the other side when it has the ball. Now that we have the ball, you are still tackling us. Get on the team.”

“Senator, I have never been on your team,” I said. I am not a grassroots conservative leader. I am not any kind of conservative leader. I am a reporter and columnist who happens to be conservative. I have no obligation other than my obligation to my readers to tell the truth.

My longtime partner, Rowland Evans, once said, “What we try to do is intersect the lines of communication of politicians.” We do that on both sides. Obviously, and increasingly as the years go by, I do that with a twist, with an edge, with a clear point of view.

People say to me, “You’re for term limits. What are the term limits for a columnist?” Fortunately, I am not employed by the government, and nobody appoints me. I go to no licensing board. I don’t have to take a test in economics. (Politicians don’t have to either.) The only test I have is the market. Television networks and newspapers give me contracts. They can get rid of me at any time. The free-market system puts me in a position where I am not required to be a defender, an advocate, a party person. I am a free and independent—and attempting to

be conservative—journalist.

A Republican Report Card

Why would a conservative ask whether the Republican Party—having come to power in Congress for the first time in forty years, and keeping control of the House of Representatives for the first time since 1928—deserves to stay in the majority?

Let me grade the Republican majority of the past two and a half years on five major issues they promised to deal with. I’m going to grade in a way that you may wish you or your children had been graded: not merely on accomplishment, but on effort, too. I give very high grades for effort because our president is arguably the most liberal of all time—not a closet conservative, I assure you—who is vetoing anything that really does change the system, with a notable exception that I will mention in a moment. Thus it is very difficult for the Republicans to accomplish anything, so I’ll give them credit for effort.

First is the promise that there would be a transfer of power from Washington to the states. The Republicans tried pretty hard, and they had one great accomplishment: welfare reform. That is the exceptional case in which President Clinton signed a bill that went counter to the philosophy of his party and of the House Democratic Caucus. He took a lot of abuse for it, but it was smart politically. That devolution of power to the states is still rolling; we won’t see the full extent for another couple of years. I give this Congress a good grade on devolution: a B, or

maybe a B+. We're off to a good start.

Second, deregulation. Getting the government—the EPA, OSHA, all the other agencies—off the backs of American businessmen. The Clinton administration has beefed up the regulatory process. The Republicans have tried very hard on this. They have been abused as spoilers of the economy, accused of trying to hurt rather than protect ordinary people. They have tried to deregulate but have come up against a stone wall. I'm going to give them a better grade than they deserve, for effort: a C-.

Third, reducing the size of government. The government is not smaller today than it was when the Republican Congress came in. The only serious budget cuts have been in the Defense Department. There have been attempts to reduce spending and the scope of government—witness the shutdown of government at the end of 1995—but the Republican Party got into a pork frenzy this year over a massive highway bill endorsed by the party leadership. I got out Woodrow Wilson's Congressional Government, which was written in the 1880s, and found that they had regressed a century in log rolling and one hand washing the other. The idea that this Congress and the Republican leadership are really trying to reduce the size of government is out the window. Because of the effort they made that first year, I will charitably give them a D instead of a failing grade.

Fourth, taxes. I have said, frequently, on CNN, that God put the Republican Party on earth to cut taxes, and if it

doesn't do that, it has no useful function. That may be an exaggeration, but it is close to true. That was the part of my column that so upset my caller from the party leadership. The fact of the matter is that we are running a surplus that the Congressional Budget Office finally admits is around \$38 billion for 1998. They started out by saying there would be a deficit; then they said it was going to be a \$2 billion or \$3 billion surplus, then \$10 billion, now up to \$39 billion. It is going to be closer to \$60 billion or \$80 billion, and in 1999 it will be close to \$100 billion. There are legitimate estimates that in five years the surplus is going to be a trillion dollars.

Under budgetary laws enacted during the Bush administration and reenacted by the Republican Congress as part of the budget deal, you cannot use a dollar of surplus for tax reduction.

Talk of reducing the national debt is nonsense. That money is already starting to seep into new government programs; it is not given back to the taxpayer.

It is not a real surplus, you may say; most of it is Social Security money. But Social Security money goes into the Treasury, and in return the Social Security system gets imaginary special-issue bonds—imaginary because the bonds are just recorded in a little book, not printed. They are an image of government in America: imaginary, non-negotiable bonds—IOWs.

The Social Security money collected by the payroll tax is a regressive tax that disproportionately affects young, entry-level workers. Eighty percent of Americans pay more payroll tax than income

tax. Even if you take all their Social Security surplus, the general fund is going to develop a surplus soon because the economy is not going into recession and because we have cut the military—perhaps too much—and also because of the 1997 capital gains tax cut. A capital gains tax cut always generates income, even though the Treasury from the beginning of time has always predicted that we will lose income.

Still there is no serious move toward a tax reduction. For that the Republicans get an F.

Fifth is what falls under the fuzzy general rubric of reform. Reform is a demagogue's word, a journalist's word, a politician's word. It doesn't mean much to anybody, but the Republicans had campaigned for reform when they came into Congress in 1994. They campaigned for term limits, but they weren't serious. Democrats hate term limits. Republicans hate term limits but pretend they are for them.

Term limits, in turn, are the key to all other reforms: members of Congress who are only going to be there for a short time are less interested in pork, in special-interests spending, in all the government apparatus to perpetuate their careers in office. They are less interested in perquisites, like the congressional pension system, which has been improved a little but is still outrageously large. They might even be interested in serious, even-handed campaign reform that affects both labor and business.

Congressional Republicans aren't going to take any risks for fear of losing their majority. They are going to err on

the side of caution. Here's an example: when the House of Representatives voted on racial quotas, a huge majority favored getting rid of quotas, but they backed down because in their individual districts and in the image-conscious media world, they were afraid to take that step.

Similarly, they have not worked very hard on the question of education reform and school choice.

My grade on reform is an F—a low F.

The retreat on all these matters is why I am frequently so sharp in my criticism of the Republican majority. I don't do it out of hostility or animosity, but more in sorrow.

I said that I was going to answer the question that was put to me: Do I think we would be better off with a Democratic Congress? It's an open question. None of the heavy Clinton stuff will get passed anyway. Two years back in the wilderness for the House Republicans might concentrate their minds.

To recapitulate my grades, they were a B, a C, a D, and two F's. Would you give your kids another year in school with that report card?

As a conservative journalist—as a journalist who is a conservative—I live in two worlds. On the one hand, I live in the world of a heavily liberal media elite; I know them, and they are friends of mine. On the other hand, I am friendly with members of the conservative movement, with Republican politicians. My friends in the media elite think my views are crazy; those in the conservative movement feel that I have betrayed them.

My response to accusations of betrayal is this: I am not a politician. I am not a conservative leader. I am a journalist with a point of view, and though my depiction of that point of view may be unpleasant or difficult for conservatives, it is not going to change.

As we go into the next millennium, our society is at a crucial point. President Clinton, for all his rhetoric, is advocating bigger government, more intrusive government.

The people ought to stand up and ask what kind of government we want. Do we want to continue to have the highest per capita tax levels in the history of the country? Do we want regulations and government to continue to grow, or do we want to devolve powers to the state, to have an individual choice system in elements of our lives and a serious attempt to reduce government, which starts with taxes?

Those are serious questions, and the best role I can play as a responsible citizen is to tell the truth on how that fight is going.

Following his talk, Robert Novak took questions from members of the audience, including Vin Weber and Tim Penny, former Minnesota congressmen; Rudy Boschwitz, former U.S. senator from Minnesota; and Mitch Pearlstein, president of Center of the American Experiment.

Tim Penny: I read about a survey in which Americans were asked, "Who do you trust?" The results were not entirely surprising: 56 percent of the respondents believe little of what Bill Clinton

says, and 64 percent believe little of what Newt Gingrich says. Is that much worse than leaders of the past? Have the media played a role in making it impossible for political leaders to be trusted?

Robert Novak: I don't believe that applies to all political leaders today. I think it is Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich. I like Newt. He is a remarkable figure and in no small part responsible for the Republican victory in 1994, but he has jumped around on issues so much that he has shattered trust. The president, of course, has never been too careful about staying on the straight and narrow.

The media are tough, but they always have been—or used to be—tough on politicians. Newspapers long ago were labeled as party newspapers. They assaulted the opposition and went into their private lives.

Tim Penny: What if Colin Powell were a politician instead of a retired general? Would we trust him?

Robert Novak: General Powell is the most popular and most trusted man in America today. If he were to seek the presidency, his popularity and trust in him would start dropping immediately because he would have to take a stand on the issues.

Vin Weber: But didn't there used to be a higher level of confidence in political leaders in both parties than there is today?

Robert Novak: I don't think it was considerably higher. Sometimes we look back with nostalgic eyes. When I covered the 1960 campaign for the

Wall Street Journal, I did a lot of door to door interviewing. One remark I heard frequently was this: What a poor condition this country has gotten into—we have a choice between Kennedy and Nixon. Now, of course, Kennedy is on Mount Olympus, and even Nixon's detractors think that, at least intellectually, he was at a much higher level than many politicians.

There has always been distrust in American politicians, but there are people we do trust. Ronald Reagan, for example, was widely trusted by the American people. There are politicians who do take principled positions, but they seem to be having a harder time being national leaders now. My candidate for the Democratic nomination is Paul Wellstone, because I think he is a principled Democrat. I'd love to see him be the nominee.

Rudy Boschwitz: I don't share your opinion of Wellstone. When you and Fred Barnes were sitting in the stands watching the Wizards lose, you counted fewer than twenty conservatives among three or four thousand journalists. Did you also discuss why that is and what we can do about it? Can we give money? Can we train young people?

Robert Novak: When I speak on college campuses, the conservative students often give a dinner for me, and I go around the table and ask them what they want to do when they get out of college. They want to be investment bankers, engineers, doctors. I rarely hear that they want to be politicians or journalists or go into show business. They are not interested in the cultural

wars, and that is why the left is winning. That's one answer.

The second is that, contrary to the way it was when I started off over forty years ago, middle management in the newspaper business is now as liberal as the reporters. The middle managers are the flower children of the sixties, and they are looking with a very tough eye on the people they hire.

I once asked a talented Washington columnist, a conservative editorial writer for the Wall Street Journal, if he would advise young people who are conservatives to go into journalism, where the whole culture is hostile to the things they believe in. He thought for a moment—dead silence on live television—and then he said no, he didn't think he would. It's too hard a life. It's a harder life than when he went in. It's certainly harder than when I went in.

The National Journalism Center trains conservative journalists. I'm a trustee of a foundation that gives prizes to conservative journalists. But it's small progress against the tremendous movement in the other direction.

Rich people have to buy means of communication and put an ideological stamp on them. Dr. Moon is not my idol, but he has made the Washington Times a conservative paper. It is a good newspaper and a very important one. Would that more of the Republican and conservative billionaires would buy newspapers. They are nominally nonideological, but they are, in fact, run by liberal executives and liberal editorial writers. We need conservatives who are willing to start new

papers at a tremendous loss of money or attempt to buy old papers, which is even more difficult. Don't ask me what to do about television.

Rupert Murdoch, of course, is the most important conservative media mogul in the world. He has several papers, the Fox broadcast network, the Fox cable network. There is no question that Fox and Mr. Murdoch's papers hire more conservatives—not just as commentators, but as news people—than anybody else. It is not an accident.

Rudy Boschwitz: Is the president going to make it through all this mischief, and if he does, will he really be able to govern? What's your inside-the-beltway view?

Robert Novak: He will not be impeached, nor do I think he will resign, under any conditions. He is going to serve out his term. I believe there will be very embarrassing revelations—not just innuendos—that will weaken his presidency for the last two years.

Mitch Pearlstein: Getting back to the question of whether conservative opinion journalists should be cheerleaders or critics, is it perhaps a straw-man argument to begin with? Can you think of any significant conservative journalists who would argue that your first responsibility is to be a cheerleader?

Robert Novak: In the past, yes. In the days when there were conservative newspapers, they almost all had a local political columnist who was an adjunct of the Republican Party, who helped make the ticket. A classic case was Kyle Palmer of the Los Angeles Times.

I can't think of any today, although there are some who pull their punches a little more than I do. That doesn't make them cheerleaders.

Vin Weber: What about your liberal counterparts? Are they cheerleading for their side?

Robert Novak: Arguably the most liberal columnists in America are Tony Lewis and Frank Rich of the New York Times. They are very, very liberal, but they do criticize their people when they think they are off track.

You may not like to hear me say this, but I think that in the past few years, at least, the liberal politicians have kept to their cause a little more faithfully than the conservatives have.

There are some talking heads on television who do tend to be cheerleaders for President Clinton and the liberal cause.

Evan Stanley: Is there a way of getting around the traditional media? What about new and alternative media—particularly cable television and the Internet?

Robert Novak: Alternative media are very important for conservatives. Radio talk shows may now have passed their peak, but certainly in the 1994 cycle, they were very important. Rush Limbaugh was and still is an important voice. America's Voice is an all-conservative cable network. Its coverage is still limited, but it is getting larger.

I don't really understand the Internet, but people tell me that it is another way of accessing conservative information.

Tom Prichard: What do you view as fair campaign finance, or appropriate campaign finance reform?

Robert Novak: I'm fairly radical on campaign finance reform, and I'm out of step with conservatives who take a strong First Amendment view that everybody should contribute as much as they want. I don't know if it is constitutional or not, but I would like to see restrictions limiting most contributions to a district or a state, limiting PAC contributions, limiting soft-money contributions. After doing that, I would raise the limits on individual contributions. The limit has been \$1,000 for nearly twenty-five years.

And if you do all that, you must have fair use of labor union money. Discussion of involuntary use of union dues for political purposes has to be part of any kind of campaign finance reform. The labor people say, Okay, if you have to have prior permission from union members to take part of their dues for political purposes, what about stockholders? Should they have to give prior permission before a corporation gets involved in political spending? I say yes.

Laura Reed: Several years back, all U.S. senators got a copy of the Clinton Chronicles video, but they didn't deal with the moral issues. I think that in the next go around there is going to be a lot more moral scourging, and I see that as a character builder for the United States.

Do you, as a longtime observer of presidential politics, think that the next round of presidential elections is

likely to see a premium on ethical standards and moral righteousness?

Robert Novak: There are two schools of thought on this. One is that from now on you are going to have to be squeaky clean to run for office; anybody with any kind of background is going to be dead meat. The other is that if Bill Clinton got elected twice, anybody can do anything and be president.

It is hard to tell where the American people will go. They do not easily turn against a man they have twice elected president. It took them a long time to turn against Nixon, and they have not turned against Clinton. A recent poll shows that on a personal rating, on job approval, Al Gore for the first time in ages has fallen into the negative, and what has he done wrong? He hasn't done anything. He is suffering for Clinton's sins.

Tim Penny: A lot of historians would tell you that it is not uncommon to have people in the White House who have all sorts of baggage.

Robert Novak: That is true. Bill Clinton is a choirboy compared to John Kennedy, but we didn't know about Kennedy—or maybe some people in the media knew bits and pieces, but didn't report them. I don't believe personal behavior is necessarily part of being a good president.

I just finished writing a review of the new biography of Calvin Coolidge, who was one of the great American presidents. He was a highly moral man, a highly intelligent man. He wrote poetry. He translated Dante's *Inferno*. Coolidge followed Warren Harding,

who was a philanderer, a rake, a libertine, and a terrible president. They were on the same ticket.

It's a mixed bag. How good a president Harry Truman was is still controversial. He too was a highly moral man, a family man. His whole life was sacrifice.

I certainly don't believe that the profile of a successful president is a person with no morals.

John Herman: When I went to journalism school, objectivity was drilled into us. A news story had to be objective.

Robert Novak: Objectivity is out the window. After I got out of the army, I worked for the Associated Press; things that are written by the Associated Press today would not have been acceptable in my day. The word now is not objectivity but fairness. There is a difference. Objectivity means you are without ideology; you are just reporting the facts. Fairness means that you don't stack the deck one way or another. National journalists overwhelmingly believe the same axioms: tax cuts are dangerous, affirmative action is always good, public schools are always better than private schools. The most we can hope for is that they will be fair in portraying their own lack of objectivity.

Tim Penny: The Society of Professional Journalists has a code of ethics that evidently has been publicly embraced by fewer than 100 major news organizations in the country. Do you find it surprising that so few organizations have endorsed the code of

ethics, and would you recommend that there be a code that deals with some of the issues we have raised here?

Robert Novak: No and no. Concern about infringement of the First Amendment is why most newspapers oppose press councils. It is a slippery slope: Who determines whether you have lived up to the code? The menace of censorship lies over the horizon.

Mike Wigley [a member of the American Experiment board of directors]: You graded the Republican Congress on five policy issues. How do you grade their political strategy, and what do you think is going to happen in November?

Robert Novak: The political strategy has been a fiasco. When the government closing occurred, the president went into a small-government routine and was reelected. The Republicans probably would have lost the House of Representatives in 1996 had it not been for Asian financial contribution scandals. They came back after the 1996 election saying that they were going to sit out the next two years and stop Clinton from passing anything and not do very much themselves.

They woke up a few months ago and realized they might lose the House of Representatives. They decided belatedly to change the strategy and go on the offensive, but the agenda is not clear. They dread the idea of impeachment because it might backfire. On the other hand, they don't really have a forward agenda that is much different from the Democrats'. The Republican strategy has gone from mistaken to unclear.

Vin Weber: A lot of folks thought we had two ideological conservative leaders in the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader. They are very able people, but the fact is that neither is an ideological leader—certainly not in the sense that Tip O’Neill was an ideological liberal with a clear and unambiguous sense of what government should do.

Newt Gingrich and Trent Lott are strategic leaders. They are tactical leaders. But contrary to conventional wisdom, particularly in Gingrich’s case, neither is an ideological leader, as Ronald Reagan was. That’s not all bad, except that, particularly in the wake of the cold war era, we need somebody to define more clearly where we stand and what we believe.

I don’t think things are quite as bad as you say. I’m a rosy-scenario type, but even in your analysis of why the Republicans have failed, you didn’t just lay out the Republican agenda, you laid out the country’s agenda. I certainly agree that we are not achieving it, but whether it be the devolution of power to the states, school choice, or any of a number of other issues, the agenda has shifted a lot. This makes me optimistic about where we are going and leads me to conclude that in spite of bias in the news media, there is an underlying dynamic that is moving America in a better direction.

Tim Penny: The other problem for the Republicans in Congress is that you have to go quite a way down into the ranks to find conservative leadership. The people next in line behind

Gingrich may be committed and consistent conservatives, but they are not effective leaders. The committee chairmen in both the House and the Senate have fallen prey to the culture of Capitol Hill. They like their power; they like the programs under their jurisdiction. Their definition of success is how much they can expand their jurisdiction, which usually means spending more money. You have to get to some of the more junior members before you find thoughtful, committed, and effective conservative voices.

Robert Novak: The committee chairmen are probably a step below the leaders in ideological content. They are very similar to their Democratic counterparts; they want the system to work.

The ideological people are the junior members, particularly those who limit their terms themselves; they act quite differently. That is why I think term limits is such an interesting concept. People who voluntarily limit their terms act differently than those who do not.

I believe that the American people are of two minds. I think they do accept that whole agenda I laid out: devolution, less government, less taxes, reform, term limits—the whole works. On the other hand, the American people will say yes if a politician, particularly as ingratiating a politician as Bill Clinton, says he’s going to make life easier for them: “I’m going to tell your boss that he has to give you time off to take your kids to the doctor. I’m going to mandate that you don’t have to fight

with the doctor about how many days you stay in the hospital.”

It's not the simple left versus right issues of the twentieth century. It's a different kind of fight. Republicans have had trouble coping with this because they too want to say they will make things easier.

A smart politician told me a long time ago—and he's exactly right—that national party leadership has to come from outside Capitol Hill. When Steve Forbes criticizes what's going on in Congress, the same congressional leaders who attack me privately attack him publicly for saying he's not in the arena. But Vin is right: there is not a leader out there right now.

The Republicans, when they are choosing a candidate for the next election, always ask, Whose turn is it? The Republican Party functions much like a Kiwanis Club: you hang around long enough, and you get to be president. But it's nobody's turn this time, so politicians are all looking for electability: Who could beat Al Gore? Who is good in the polls?

Perhaps what they should be looking for is someone who can take the issues more effectively and in a more convincing way to the public for a new century—a century in which Americans get away from “what can the government do for me?” and get back to an agenda of greater freedom. Freedom is a lost word in American politics. n