

PUTTING IT IN PERSPECTIVE

By David Winston



The Old Democratic Misdirection Play On Tax Hikes

The show put on by Democratic leaders as they took control of Congress last week was the best entertainment since Al Gore did the Macarena. Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) raced from party to party as she crafted a new image for herself — think Gloria Steinem plays Horatio Alger to a Democratic chorus of “over the river and through the woods to grandmother’s ‘House’ we go.” Then there was Rep. Rahm Emanuel (Ill.)

scurrying for cover as Cindy Sheehan and her band of angry anti-war activists shouted down the new head of the Democratic Caucus at his first big news conference. Meanwhile, visions of subpoenas danced in the heads of new House and Senate committee chairmen, already juggling for optimum media coverage. And most of us thought the holiday season was over.

Give the Democrats their due. They won the elections handily in November and deserve to celebrate their victory. But now all the corks have been popped, the glowing stories have been written and aired, and, for Democrats, it’s time to pay the piper.

They finally must go beyond hollow criticism and lead. They must take responsibility

for governing; and that means, at long last, they will be forced to put an issue agenda before the American people.

Their “Six for ‘06” agenda reflected cherry-picked campaign issues, not a policy agenda that addressed critical issues such as terrorism, economic competition and energy independence in a serious way. With the Speaker’s gavel firmly in Pelosi’s hand, however, Democrats no longer can escape the reality that they have a significant structural problem. They are a center-left party led by an extreme-left leader in a center-right country.

The American people didn’t elect Democrats in November because they suddenly took an ideological swing to the left. Voters were

unhappy with what they saw as the Republican Party’s inability to get things done, whether it was dealing with Hurricane Katrina, gas prices or the Iraq War.

So, they took a chance on the Democrats, and now the Democrats must produce. But produce what? In their first week, Democratic leaders accomplished little more than adopting a new set of House rules that, among other things, imposed new restrictions on Capitol Hill relationships with lobbyists and, to the surprise of many, maintained the Republicans’ term-limit rule for committee chairmen.

But, according to a New York Times story by Carl Hulse, the leaders told their colleagues “they would revisit the restrictions when there was less attention focused on the dawn of the Democratic era.” It makes one wonder what else these Democratic leaders intend to “revisit” when the nation’s and the media’s attention is diverted by other issues.

We didn’t have to wonder long.

Last week’s vote on the House rules was, in reality, all about taxes — likely to be one of the big battleground issues over the next two years. In 1995 when Republicans regained the House, then-Speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.) made significant changes in the way the House did business. One of the most important was to require a three-fifths super-majority vote to raise taxes.

Last week, Democrats began their image makeover as the party of fiscal responsibility by touting their new “pay-as-you-go” proposal, but they were practically mute when it came to their decision to quietly not strengthen the three-fifths requirement in their proposed new House rules.

Seeing their move for what it was, a backdoor opening to raise taxes, Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) moved to retain the rule that has served as an effective check on attempts to raise taxes for more than a decade. Democrats voted unanimously to defeat Boehner’s motion and allow tax increases with a simple majority vote.

While the Democrats have cleared the procedural path for tax increases, they’re smart enough to know that moving this early to raise taxes would be political suicide. Instead, we’re going to see an extension of the President Bush-bashing 2006 campaign cloaked in the cover of oversight hearings.

Endless investigations into the “incompetence” and “venality” of the Bush administration will be the order of business for both the House and Senate in the coming months. Senate Democrats will have 11 hearings on Iraq alone in the next few weeks, while Judiciary Chairman Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) will investigate charges of “torture” by the United States.

House Oversight and Government Reform Chairman Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) will focus on “waste, fraud and abuse,” with the Katrina federal relief effort at center stage, and many other chairmen in both chambers have indicated their intention to hold hearings.

This “oversight” strategy makes sense for Democrats. It allows them to promote their image as fiscal watchdogs, raise their poll numbers by keeping the negative spotlight on Bush and Republicans, and delay unveiling the least politically popular elements of their agenda (i.e., tax increases) until that moment when the nation’s “attention” is elsewhere.

Instead, Democrats won’t commit to raising or not raising taxes. They’ll hype their PAYGO rule. They’ll talk about balanced budgets and the evils of deficit spending as they lay the groundwork for an eventual assault against the president’s tax cuts and the Iraq War.

Their game plan? When “less attention is focused on the dawn of the Democratic era,” watch for the “blue team” to do a play fake up the middle and run left.

David Winston is president of The Winston Group, a Republican polling firm.

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