

NATION

Pruden on Politics

By Wesley Pruden



Republican Guard and a bad hair day

You know the Republican Guard had a bad day when Warren Christopher whipped 'em.

Over in the House chamber, the vaunted "Contract With America" took a licking, too, when Newt Gingrich either couldn't or wouldn't — at any rate didn't — make a fight for the so-called "super majority" that would give teeth to the balanced-budget amendment.

The grave for term-limits legislation, as we all know, is already half dug.

It was a bad hair day all around.

In the offices of the House Rules Committee, a chastened chairman took down the photograph of a distinguished chairman of three decades ago because red-hots in the Congressional Black Caucus are offended by the racial attitudes of a bygone era. Up in its place went a snapshot of Ronald Reagan, so small and hung so high up on the wall that no one could recognize the Gipper. (The historical cleansing of America continues. If the Congressional Black Caucus demands that memorials honoring slave owners be dismantled, we can expect to see the Republicans taking crowbar and blasting powder out to plunder and burn Mount Vernon and Monticello.)

The retreat of the Republican Guard, blowing hard with bombast and boast barely more than a fortnight ago, continues. The voters who sent them here with such bright prospects can only hope now that Newt can summon some of the fire with which he defends his book deal and burn some bottoms in his timid army. A lot of them look a lot like summer soldiers, and it's not yet St. Valentine's Day.

The retreat from the balanced-budget amendment continues to puzzle nearly everyone, suggesting that the genetic inheritance of Republicans — they're born programmed to switch rather than fight and to treasure their losses — may doom prospects of dislodging the Democrats over the long term.

The balanced-budget amendment is the kind of



Not a role model

opportunity not likely to fall into Newt's lap again. Nothing could have been better calculated to show partisan differences in starker relief than risking temporary defeat to honor the Contract With America. The Democrats could not have escaped the blame for defeating it, leaving the Republicans with the trust of their constituents.

Certain Republicans have been mumbling for weeks that it's better to take half a loaf, an amendment without teeth, than no loaf at all. This is often the only strategy available to sad sacks in a miserable minority, but it seems not to have occurred to the Republicans in Congress that when you run the bakery you don't have to take half a loaf.

The tax-and-spend Democrats now regrouping have the congressional Republicans exactly where they want them, having enacted an amendment with the killing power of a popgun. The Sunday-school Republicans make the easy argument that any kind of amendment will "intimidate" the big spenders and the big spenders will be too "ashamed" to push for higher taxes once the toothless amendment becomes law.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the secretary of state looked to the Republicans to be as fierce as Deion Sanders. He lectured them like naughty schoolboys about the Contract With America proposal to cut U.S. spending on the United Nations. Under the legislation proposed in the Contract With America, the U.S. contribution to U.N. peacekeeping would be cut by an amount equal to voluntary U.S. spending in support of U.N. operations such as enforcement of the Bosnia embargo or the no-fly zone in northern Iraq. The "campaign Republicans," who are not to be confused with "congressional Republicans," railed at the hard truth that the United States does not get credit for its voluntary spending on military operations in places like Bosnia and northern Iraq.

If the Congress bruises feelings at the United Nations, Mr. Christopher warned them, everyone else would cut their spending (nearly everyone else already has) and the United States would have to send its own cops to every Haiti in the world.

Chastened, the Republicans mumbled apologies and vowed not to be naughty again.

"While at the U.N. we're called deadbeats," says Rep. Benjamin Gilman of New York, the chairman of the committee, "we still spend hundreds of millions of dollars in support of U.N. peacekeeping operations, for which we receive no credit. And while [we try] to address this issue, we certainly don't want to prohibit peacekeeping or peacemaking."

Of course not.

Maybe yesterday was an aberration. Maybe, unlike their namesakes in the Persian Gulf war, this Republican Guard will stand and fight on another day. Until then, the people who sent them to Washington can take some comfort in the fact that Newt and the guys have bigger offices and better parking places than the Democrats.