

OP-ED

The so-called GOP revolution

Consistent with the pretense that he remains the real president of the United States, Bill Clinton tried to make out in his State of the Union address that he "will not let" last year's foolish assault weapons ban be repealed by the dark forces of the National Rifle



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Association and the Republican Party. With President Clinton whimpering about "a lot of people [who] laid down their seats" to pass the ban, you'd have thought violating the Second Amendment was the moral equivalent of storming the sands of Iwo

Jima.

Yet whatever the NRA may be up to, don't bet your assault rifle the Republican leadership has plans for a landing behind enemy lines. One of the most astonishing Republican retreats in the course of Month One of the GOP's purported revolution has been the party leaders' wobbling on reversing the gun control laws the Democrats (with some Republican help) enacted last year. Both Mr. Gingrich and Mr. Dole have refused to betray the slightest interest in repealing the assault weapons ban.

Asked last week by The Washington Times about repealing it, Mr. Gingrich averred, "I don't have any comment on that right now." That's surprising, since it's about the only issue on which the loquacious Speaker has no opinion. "Oh, I haven't even thought about that," responded Mr. Dole to the same question. That's not so surprising, since the number of things Mr. Dole hasn't thought about would fill the Congressional Record.

Nevertheless, by Sunday morning El Stupido Supremo had sufficiently cogitated his way through the gun control issue to sally forth on CBS' "Face the Nation" and claim that "they" (meaning the majority he's supposed to be leading) "don't have the votes" to repeal the ban. Maybe not, but because Mr. Dole didn't bother to force a vote on the ban when it came up in the Senate version of last year's crime bill, the less skilled bean-counters amongst us begin to suspect something.

What one suspects is that the Republican leadership just doesn't give much of a hoot about gun control or the constitutional right it vio-

lates, except in so far as the issue is useful for squeezing votes out of gun owners rightly frightened by the gun-control fanaticism that possesses the Democrats. Hence, Republican leaders think the issue is unimportant and not worth fighting about.

Yet the truth is that without the Democrats' suicidal penchant for supporting gun control, the Republican majority might not exist at all. Earlier this month, as Republican leaders were convincing themselves that Second Amendment rights aren't important, a sadder but wiser president was explaining that maybe they are.

"The NRA is the reason the Republicans control the House," Mr. Clinton told the Cleveland Plain Dealer in an interview. "The fights I found cost a lot — the fight for the assault weapons ban cost 20 Democratic members their seats in Congress." At least somebody learned something from last year's elections. And not only Mr. Clinton. As many as 26 House Democrats have written to the president that they want to repeal the ban, and Mr. Gingrich is now beginning to comment on it favorably.

While even Mr. Clinton has learned enough to pretend to back away from gun control and invoke the Second Amendment even as he vows to veto a repeal of the ban, not all Republicans betray the indifference espoused by their official leaders. "The speaker, the majority leader and the rest of the leadership don't want it [repeal of the ban] in the Contract," says Rep. Bill McCollum, whose crime subcommittee is holding hearings on Republican anti-crime legislation, but "I don't think that is the wish of the NRA representatives."

If the leadership is right that the votes don't exist, maybe there needs to be a lot more discussion about

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what kind of revolution the Republicans are prepared to lead. Or maybe the leaders think that gathering the votes would jeopardize other reforms closer to their hearts — the budget amendment, unfunded mandates, etc.

But most of those proposals, if they haven't already been deflated by intra-party factionalism, didn't drag the Democrats from the thrones on which they have squatted for 40 years. Gun control is one of those blood-in-the-water issues that topples thrones.

If the Republicans were smart, they'd repeal the ban this week, leaving the Democrats sputtering at the awesome new power that has suddenly arrived in Washington and forcing Mr. Clinton to prove his devotion to the Second Amendment by vetoing what the majority passed. But some Republicans won't do that, and their leaders won't try to lead them to do it. And that is why, for all their victories and all their votes, the Republicans seem determined to remain the Stupid Party.

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