

A Response

Merrill Cook

THE EDITORS OF *DIALOGUE: A Journal of Mormon Thought* graciously invited me to write about Utah's 1996 Second District Congressional race after deciding to publish an essay by my opponent, Ross C. Anderson. I am grateful, and frankly a little intimidated, by the chance to write for a journal I have always admired. But I hesitate to dissect the 1996 race again. I read Mr. Anderson's essay with great interest. It was very well written and left me with a renewed respect for his intellect. I disagree with him on key points, as you would expect of political opponents, but I don't want to waste this opportunity offering yet another version of a political race run nearly two years ago. I don't think the analysis would be meaningful at this point to anyone but me, my family, and my campaign staff. Instead, I want to share my analysis of the 105th Congress and discuss what I think we can expect from this Congress during its second year. Given the dramatic impact the 105th Congress has already had on most Utahns, I think that discussion would be more meaningful to *Dialogue* readers.

Second-generation products, from software to medicines, are typically touted as maintaining the core strength of the original product while eliminating most of the original's problems. I think you could describe the 105th Congress as a second-generation 104th Congress, retaining the vision that swept Republicans into power after nearly forty years of Democratic control, while losing the hard, confrontational edge that lead to confrontations with the White House, government shutdowns, and public criticism.

The public has been the beneficiary of the lessons learned by this Congress. House Speaker Newt Gingrich talked movingly of those lessons in a floor speech he gave the night the balanced budget resolution passed.¹ The Founding Fathers intentionally crafted a congress and a

1. In "Concurrent Resolution on the Budget, Fiscal Year 1998, House of Representatives," *Congressional Record*, 20 May 1997.

presidency that can easily deadlock unless they accept the inevitability of compromise, he pointed out. Members of the 104th Congress spent much of their two years learning that lesson.

I believe it was time well-spent. The necessity of compromise learned by a new Republican majority gave us the remarkable budget accord between the 105th Congress and the White House. This accord gave Americans their first federal tax cut in sixteen years and returned our nation to a balanced budget that, according to latest projections, may be a reality as early as 1999, according to the method by which a balanced budget is currently measured.

I think this recent spirit of compromise was driven primarily by four factors. I do not list these in order of importance. First, as I said, the hard line tactics of the 104th Congress which lead to a drawn-out standoff with President Clinton and two government shutdowns played badly with the public. Second, the Republican majority in Congress is slim enough that leadership finds it prudent to bring Democrats on board to ensure passage of major legislation. (Currently, in the House, there are 227 Republicans, 203 Democrats, and four vacant seats due to resignations and death.) Third, there is little mark of the lame duck on President Clinton. His approval rating in 1997 was at a three-year high, despite a number of ethical attacks on several fronts.² In a political age I believe historians will note for its reliance on and reverence of polls, Congress recognizes that a president with a 59-percent approval rating, even a president from the minority party in his second term, is a force to be reckoned with.³ Fourth, I think both parties have edged a little closer to the middle recently. President Clinton began that shift after the Republicans swept into the congressional majority in 1994. Compare his inaugural speech in 1992 with his speech last year. In 1992 he told us government must do more. Last year he warned the era of big government is past.⁴

But this Republican Congress has also shifted, though I think to a lesser degree than President Clinton, in the past two years. This shift was driven largely by the near impossibility of fulfilling Republican promises to the American public while fighting with the president. Budgets, reforms, and tax packages need the president's signature and veto-proof majorities aren't easy to come by. They were even less easy to attain after the 1996 election. Republicans, rightly I believe, read the loss of some Republican seats as a signal from voters that they would rather see Congress make progress forged in compromise than get stalled in ideological debates.

Unhappy keepers of the flame in each camp, by themselves, couldn't

2. According to several CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup polls.

3. CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup Poll, 9 Jan. 1998.

4. *This Week*, ABC television, 11 Jan. 1998.

halt this slow shift to the center that was years in the making, no matter how clever their sound bites or impassioned their arguments. Even a federal election, which traditionally sends the boldest of party leaders scrambling for familiar ground, could only briefly rock back this recent shift to middle ground. But with the election over, the now projected slim-but-stable Republican majority still in Congress, and a still popular president in the White House, the forces that prompted the shift in both parties would still be in play.

While events like the 1994 congressional turnover and the 1996 loss of seats prompted both parties to moderate their positions, I think a more profound, yet, over time, subtler, phenomenon played a large role: the growing disenfranchisement of middle America. Pollsters and pundits had been noting through the 1990s that, increasingly, Americans felt that neither party truly represented them. Leaders in both parties knew this. But it wasn't until 1994, when enthusiasm for Colin Powell focused the frustration and alienation of middle America, that party leaders began to soften ideological hard lines.

As a result of these four factors, the two parties were ideologically closer and more willing to compromise in 1997 than I believe they have been in recent memory. As I said, I find the common ground to be a bit more Republican. Achievements like tax cuts and a balanced budget are traditional Republican objectives. Yet there is a noteworthy Democratic influence to these achievements, influences that as a moderate Republican I am pleased with: Medicare now covers many preventative tests most senior citizens need at some point, such as screenings for breast cancer, colon cancer, and diabetes; the \$500 per-child tax credit has been extended to lower income families; and federal funds have been increased for Pell grants available to college students.

While both parties moved quickly to take deserved credit for these meaningful compromises, staunch ideologues in each criticized the compromises as at least a partial betrayal of each party's beliefs. These criticisms alone mean little. But persistent complaints from party hard-liners with respectable followings, coupled with the federal surplus, signal, I believe, a dash back this year to traditional home ground for each party. This rush back can already be seen. The president who, last year, announced that the era of big government is over, will, at the State of the Union, unveil what he himself has titled the largest federal child care program in the history of the nation. Meanwhile, respected Republican policy leaders like Steve Forbes are warning Congress that tax cuts this year need to be deeper and more traditionally Republican. Recently, on ABC's *This Week*, he put it this way, "On tax cuts, Republicans need to get real or get out."

I agree with analysts who put some of the blame for the recent return

to safe ports on a stranger not seen in these parts since 1970: A federal surplus of an accumulated \$200 billion over the next five years, the kind that makes liberals sketch out expanded social programs and conservatives dream of deeper tax cuts. What is it that marriage counselors always say? Disagreements over money are the cause of most divorces. I wonder if congressional unity can prevail in the face of a challenge blamed for the erosion of marital unity.

In 1998 I foresee less agreement among the two parties in Congress and less agreement between Congress and the White House. I think the combined pressure of a coming federal election and the surplus will, at least temporarily, push the parties farther apart. Here's why. Members who for years have dreamed of a surplus and sighed, "If only," will see these billions as a chance to fulfill long-denied ideologic dreams or meet constituent needs they haven't been able to meet before.

Party leaders will, understandably, see a surplus as the first chance in a long time, and maybe the last chance in a long time, for a full expression of exactly what their party stands for, whether that's comprehensive social programs that cast a net of compassion over the forgotten in our society or deep tax cuts that trigger a frenzy of saving and investing expected to ensure personal prosperity for years to come.

My own position on the surplus is a moderate one. I think some tax cuts are vitally important this year. For example, I am co-sponsor of a bill to get rid of the marriage penalty, which can add as much as \$1,400 to a couple's tax bill if both are working and they file jointly. Since two-income families often find child care one of their biggest expenses, I think this tax cut can be more meaningful to them than federally-funded child care.

However, I think judicious spending increases, particularly increases that stimulate the economy, should be considered.⁵ Last spring I joined 213 members of the House in voting for the Shuster-Oberstar-Petri-Rahall Bipartisan Substitute to the Budget Resolution which would have increased federal spending on transportation by \$12 billion over five years, while still balancing the federal budget by 2002. This proposal failed by two votes in both the House and Senate.

Now, with a \$200 billion surplus in the wings, a proposal similar to this will likely come to the floor again this spring. Again I will vote for increased federal spending on transportation. Utah urgently needs federal assistance to finish the I-15 expansion and fund a dozen other road and airport projects by the 2002 Winter Games. Utah's Department of Transportation estimated last spring it will cost \$2 billion over six years to ex-

5. See "Infrastructure Dollars Pay Big Dividends," *Wall Street Journal*, 12 Aug. 1997.

pand I-15 and dramatically expand the Salt Lake International Airport.⁶ UDOT officials deemed these projects, along with nearly a dozen major improvements of state roads, necessary to smoothly move participants and spectators expected for the 2002 Winter Games.

While it's doubtful Congress will fulfill all of UDOT's requests, it makes much more sense for Utah and other states with major transportation needs to get increased federal support during these coming years of federal surpluses than to raise local taxes or, in Utah's case, bond to the tune of as much as \$1 billion. (The Utah legislature authorized the state to bond for \$600 million to pay for the I-15 expansion. Utah has already hit that ceiling, selling \$340 million in general obligation bonds and \$260 million in anticipatory notes, which will be converted to general obligation bonds in three years.) Keep in mind, the transportation amendment was about a \$12-billion increase over five years, slightly more than 5 percent of the anticipated federal surplus.

But while I support both modest tax cuts and judicious increases in federal spending, I think these anticipated surpluses provide a priceless opportunity to make some tough decisions about Social Security that Congress must make sometime in the next several years. As many of you know, years of surplus in the Social Security Trust Fund have been used to mask the actual size of the budget deficit. Even though we talk of a "balanced budget" as soon as 1999, that budget is balanced on the back of a more than \$100 billion surplus in the Social Security Trust Fund—a fund earmarked to care for the army of baby boomers marching toward retirement. Even Congress's latest surplus forecast for 2002 includes a \$120-billion Social Security surplus that year minus the expected \$88 billion shortfall in the rest of the budget, for an actual surplus of \$32 billion.⁷

I have always said that, at some point, we must stop using the Social Security Trust Fund to balance the federal budget and earmark it for the older Americans for whom it was created. Analysts tell us if we continue to use these funds to balance the budget, and there is no change in Social Security policy, these surpluses will erode and the fund will go into the red by 2012, paying out more in benefits than it receives in payroll taxes. The fund is expected to go completely bankrupt in 2029.⁸

Then there is the \$250 billion a year America pays for interest payments on the national debt. Both liberals and conservatives acknowledge there would be more money for both social programs and deeper tax cuts down the road if we paid down the national debt now, eventually wiping out those whopping interest payments.

6. "Utah Transportation Infrastructure Needs, 2002 Winter Olympics," submitted to House Subcommittee on Surface Transportation, 19 Feb. 1997.

7. "It's Party Time," *U.S. News & World Report*, 12 Jan. 1998.

8. American Academy of Actuaries, *Issue Brief*, Fall 1997.

In short, I hope Congress carefully balances the need to cut federal taxes with the equally strong need for judicious spending on projects like transportation that ultimately stimulate our economy with the financial demands of coming decades and present pressure of interest payments on the deficit. I don't think it needs to be all-or-nothing on any of these three options. As with our personal budgets, competing needs must be weighed and given appropriate weight.

The prospect of a divergent Congress troubles me most because weighty issues such as tax reform and preservation of Social Security deserve prompt congressional action. Major legislative initiatives like this require congressional accord and White House support.

I am anxious to see Congress tackle sweeping tax reform. While I am pleased with the 1997 tax cuts, they do not take the place of sweeping reform that eliminates the fundamental flaws in our code. We have all been frustrated with those flaws for years. They penalize saving and investing, favor the rich over the poor, and reward those who can find legal ways to duck their tax burden.

I have been passionate about tax reform my entire political career. I have joined a growing group of House members who are pushing comprehensive federal tax reform by the year 2000. But in today's Congress, accomplishments like this year's tax cuts and budget accord, and the comprehensive tax reform I'm fighting for, require a reasonably compatible Congress and cooperative White House. (I say "reasonably." Clearly the structure of our government and the realities of representing such a large and diverse populace result in, even require, inherent tensions.)

Happily, the days of twisting arms, dispensing favors, and blackballing enemies that marked previous congressional momentum are over.⁹ But in this modern Congress that means meaningful legislation requires civil negotiations between parties and between Congress and the White House.

Despite the pressures of an election year and the predicted disruption of federal surpluses, I think the public's best interest is served by a Congress sufficiently civil to tackle tough issues too long left on the back burner by years of congressional wrangling.

9. See "Rostenkowski in Winter," *Newsweek*, 12 Jan. 1998.