

## GUEST OBSERVERS

By Former Rep. Bill Paxton



## Ron Lewis, the Contract And a Republican Dream Come True

**W**elfare, lawsuit and education reform. Personal rate, capital gains and death tax relief. Strengthening our military and foreign policies.

As 1994 began, even the most optimistic House Republican only dreamed of having this long-held agenda become reality.

After 40 years of being minority players in a Democrat-dominated body, there wasn't a single House GOP Member who had served when our party last controlled Congress in 1954.

Early in 1994 while planning for my wedding with fellow Rep. Susan Molinari (R-N.Y.), I reflected a deeply ingrained minority mind-set. In spite of serving as National Republican Congressional Committee chairman, responsible for electing House Republican candidates, we scheduled our delayed honeymoon for immediately after the November election. We figured the election results would once again leave us in the minority with no new responsibilities.

Then, along came Ron Lewis of Kentucky, and everything changed.

His victory on May 24, 1994, in a special election provided a glimmer of hope because that seat had never been held by a Republican.

Other signs had been emerging.

Every week, men and women heretofore uninvolved in politics would call or come to the NRCC to tell us they were running for the House. First, a trickle, then a torrent of small-business owners, doctors, veterinarians, civic

activists, local TV personalities and others determined to run previously impossible-to-win races.

They were joined by others with political experience, including state and local lawmakers, who sensed an opportunity to win seats long out of reach.

President Bill Clinton's early missteps on myriad issues from health care to guns helped fuel these candidates and supporters.

But, rather than just running against the Democrats, House Republicans took the bold step of running for the "Contract with America," a specific, positive and sweeping agenda that enthused the newly empowered citizenry looking for change in Washington.

Incumbent House Republicans also provided dramatic evidence of a changed attitude during that pivotal election cycle.

Prior to 1994, Republicans in Congress were not part of the NRCC. Early in '94 the NRCC was on the verge of bankruptcy. As the year progressed, the Members took control and created a campaign structure that gave them a fighting chance to win.

For the first time ever, Members wrote checks from their campaign committees, they organized fundraisers back home to benefit the NRCC, they traveled across the country assisting the fledgling candidates, and in many cases they filled the roles previously filled by paid staffers and consultants, most of whom were laid off to keep the creditors from the NRCC's doors.

Despite the obstacles, the ingrained assumptions, and four decades of history, change was about to occur.

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By Former Rep. Victor H. Fazio



## Past as Prologue: 2006 Cycle Bears Similarities to 1994

**T**he year 1994 was a watershed for Congress. It is when Republicans took back the House after 40 years of Democratic majorities. As chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee during the early 1990s, I had a bird's-eye view of that fateful election campaign.

Many people remember 1994 as the year of the Republicans' "Contract with America," but it was put out only weeks before the election. Putting aside the populist message of the Contract and the continuing differences between the parties on social issues, there were three substantive concerns affecting that particular campaign, all of which contributed to creating a "perfect storm" and eventual shift in power:

- The House failed to even bring to the floor a viable plan to provide basic health care to all Americans — despite a high-profile campaign by the Clinton administration. While certain Republicans and advertising hired-guns created a great deal of misinformation about a new bureaucracy that would be impossible to control or afford, the Democratic base was offended because its own party couldn't facilitate Clinton's most important initiative.

- Congress produced an essential deficit reduction plan that contained no broad-based tax increases, except, notably, a 4.3 cents-per-gallon gas tax. While the plan went a long way toward reducing the deficit and balancing the budget, we Democrats allowed Republicans to use the tax increase effectively against us dur-

ing the '94 campaign. Ironically, while Republicans used this gas tax to their advantage, they have yet to repeal the tax and recently enjoyed earmarking hundreds of highway projects with the proceeds. Since the economic boom of the later 1990s (an outgrowth of Democratic deficit reduction efforts) had yet to occur, the old adage "in politics, no good deed goes unpunished" prevailed.

- Finally, there was the proposed crime bill, which, among other things, banned automatic assault weapons. The National Rifle Association ferociously opposed this and made an effective case to voters in rural districts against Democrats who voted to allow the issue to even come to the floor. Many moderate/conservative Democrats were never able to recover from the increasingly negative response they received from Second Amendment supporters. Once again, the generally positive effect of the broader crime bill was yet to be felt.

In addition, events surrounding the House Bank and Post Office did little to help the Democrats avoid the charge of "corruption." Republicans were able to connect with the Perot voters who were still searching for a reform movement after their candidate's loss in the 1992 election. And, at the same time, Republicans, under the leadership of then-Rep. Bill Paxton (N.Y.), raised a record amount of funds in the 1994 campaign cycle to help challengers in many suddenly competitive races.

But what is past may also be prologue. There are strong similarities between 1994 and 2006: A general economic malaise surrounding soaring gas prices and lagging wages and a real estate bubble thought to be on the verge of burst-

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# Class of '94 Paved Way for GOP's Future Successes

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On election night, I flew to Washington from Buffalo and when I arrived at 7 p.m., NRCC Executive Director Maria Cino reported that Republicans Mark Souder in Indiana and Ed Whitfield in Kentucky had just been declared winners in two key races. "We're in for a landslide" were her words, but, even then, it seemed difficult to grasp.

At midnight, it did finally sink in when an old friend from my New York Legislature days called.

In a stunning upset, George Pataki (R) had just defeated Mario Cuomo (D) for governor, but his first words that night were about the election of the first House GOP majority in 40 years: "I never thought I'd live to see Republicans in control!"

The year 1994 was truly historic, as have been the continuing string of House Republican majorities, now in their second decade.

But, the impact is far greater than electoral results.

House Republicans have changed the policy landscape of America.

The terms of debate have shifted significantly to the right.

The words and phrases of both parties reflect those of the Contract with America.

Even governors and state legislators pursue initiatives first set forth by House Republicans.

And, today, a majority of Senate Republicans are "graduates" of the House of Representatives, carrying to that body an enthusiasm for action on the reform agenda.

After a decade in power, a partial list of accomplishments that has resulted is quite impressive:

- GOP budgetary and tax relief policies ig-

nited the economic growth of the 1990s and the strong economy of recent years;

- welfare reform moved millions of Americans from government dependency to work and independence;

- reforms were enacted in the areas of energy, telecommunications, education, litigation, Medicare, financial services and criminal justice;

- Congressional reform quickly passed, most notably requiring term limits on committee and subcommittee chairmen; and

- Republicans worked with President Bush

to respond to the unprecedented challenges of Sept. 11, 2001, including the most sweeping reorganization of federal agencies since World War II; carrying out the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; rebuilding our military and intelligence capabilities, which were significantly diminished during the Clinton presidency.

When I first arrived in Washington after the 1988 election, like many others, I hung a picture of Ronald Reagan in my office.

His philosophical strength and visionary leadership helped our party capture the hearts and minds of the American people, erasing the

Watergate cloud hanging over the GOP and starting our march to the majority.

Then, the election of 1994 allowed House Republicans to begin implementing our conservative agenda, which in turn helped pave the way for the election of Bush, still more legislative success, and a fundamental change in the way America will function for a generation or more.

And it all began with Lewis and a special election in Kentucky in May 1994.

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## '06 Could Be Democratic Version of '94

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ing have brought about presidential approval ratings that are lower than those of the Clinton White House in 1994. In addition, in much the same way the proposed crime bill exposed De-

mocrats in 1994, the Terri Schiavo case and stem-cell research are two issues that illustrate how out of touch the current Congressional majority is with most Ameri-

cans. And Americans are again seeing stories of investigations regarding the ethics of those who control the power in Washington.

House Democrats are looking to gain electoral advantage from the highly negative political environment the majority is confronting. In order to take advantage of opportunities, Democratic Members must make sure the DCCC is well funded so that it can have a real impact in races where it will matter. The successful Republican effort in 1994 demonstrates how important this can be.

Equally important is finding common ground on the issues and message that will impact swing voters in marginal districts held by Republicans. The party has to speak to concerns that have broad appeal in ways that reassure potential supporters that Democrats share their values on matters of importance to all Americans.

Democratic candidates have to make the case that Republicans, entering the historically difficult second midterm election of a two-term president, have lost their way. If the average American voter finds the majority out of touch with his or her most pressing concerns — the growing cost of health care, the lack of progress in educating our kids, and the increasingly threatened pension and Social Security systems — that person will vote for the Democratic alternatives.

Polls show that many Americans believe the conduct of the war in Iraq has been mismanaged and there is no positive outcome in sight. For many voters, the administration's discus-

sion of Social Security reform has been a disastrous blind alley that has weakened public confidence in Republicans on other domestic issues. And, as was the case in 1994, Congressional ethics are likely to be the subject of only greater media focus throughout the coming year. Democrats have an opportunity to go on the offensive and take over the role as the party of reform, if they are willing to take the approach used against them in 1994.

For the past 12 years, despite several close calls, Congressional Democrats have remained in the wilderness, but now they have a great opportunity to emerge. With lawmakers' re-elect numbers in the low to mid 40s, it is reminiscent of the 1994 cycle. Despite an incumbent-driven round of redistricting and the highly successful Republican money machinery, a Democratic majority is within reach. It's up to the Democrats to seize the moment.

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