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Party of No Pledges to Solve Problems One Day: Caroline Baum

By Caroline Baum - Sep 27, 2010
Bloomberg Opinion

A contract is a contract, a pledge just a pledge. If a contract can be abrogated when the political winds shift, what sort of staying power should we expect from a pledge?

The contract I refer to is the 1994 [Contract with America](#), a legislative agenda presented and signed on the Capitol steps 16 years ago by 367 Republican revolutionaries. It included eight major reforms and 10 bills, which the aspiring lawmakers promised to bring to the floor in the first 100 days if they became the majority party. (They did and they did.)

The measures included a balanced budget amendment, term limits, tax incentives for small business, and Social Security, welfare and tort reforms.

“If we break this Contract, throw us out,” speaker-to-be [Newt Gingrich](#) and his band of rebels told the audience gathered at the Capitol on Sept. 27, 1994.

It may have lacked the eloquence of the [Founders' pledge](#) of “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our Sacred Honor,” but it was a bold invitation to hold them to their word.

Last week, House Republican members used a humbler backdrop -- a Virginia hardware store -- to unveil a humbler governing agenda: the agenda being something to campaign on aside from the party of no.

Or, as [Politico](#) put it, “GOP unveils planks in lumber store.”

Presented by House minority leader [John Boehner](#) and 12 colleagues, the “[Pledge to America](#)” featured a preamble with lofty language (“America is an idea”), an appeal to first principles (“government’s powers are derived from the consent of the governed”), symbolic photographs (the Statue of Liberty, Mount Rushmore and a butcher shop), and a plan to create jobs, cut taxes, control spending, reduce the size of government and repeal Obamacare. All in 45 pages.

Pledge to Undo

The Pledge was better on what the Republicans would undo (the Obama agenda) than what it would do and how it would do it.

For example, the two references to “[entitlement](#)” programs were in the context of protecting them. Social Security and Medicare? The GOP wants a “full accounting” -- and clearly nothing more before the November election.

The proposed “hard cap” on new discretionary spending isn’t going to fix the problem. Non-security discretionary spending accounts for about 17 percent of [total outlays](#). If you’re going to cut spending, you have to cut where the spending is, as bank robber Willie Sutton might have said.

What became of the Contract? Were there any lasting effects?

First 100 Days

The Contract with America was revolutionary for what it set out to achieve and a disappointment for what it accomplished. (The Department of Education, targeted for extinction, is still kicking.)

Gingrich kept his promise, bringing all 10 bills to the floor in a flurry of legislative activity that historians have compared to FDR’s first 100 days. With a 230-to-204 Republican [majority](#) (there was one independent), nine bills passed the House. Guess which one didn’t?

Term limits. Having retaken the chamber for the first time in 40 years, the old guard was not about to let the young bucks legislate the Republican party out of office. Gingrich failed to get the two-thirds majority needed for a constitutional amendment to limit terms in office to 12 years.

Most of the bills died in the Senate or on the president’s desk. Government did get smaller as a share of the economy in the 1990s, from 22.1 percent in 1991 to 18 percent in 2000. Part of that was a result of the peace dividend and the decline in [defense spending](#).

Shifting Views

What happened to the spirit of the contract? Did Gingrich & Co. have a change of heart or lose their nerve?

Gingrich’s star started to fade when the House shut down the government in late 1995 and early 1996 when President [Bill Clinton](#) refused to go along with proposed budget cuts.

“By 1997, the GOP began to detect public opinion was shifting,” said [John Samples](#), director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Representative Government. “They realized they could not get a

permanent majority out of limiting government and balancing the budget.”

At the same time, evangelicals and social conservatives were becoming a larger force in the Republican Party -- “a constituency that couldn’t be ignored” with a different agenda from that of fiscal conservatives, Samples said.

By that time the [budget](#) was moving toward balance -- the U.S. government posted its first surplus in three decades -- and the public mood was shifting away from limited government. (The public favors smaller government except when it means giving up benefits.)

Contract’s Lessons

In 1998, following reprimands for ethics violations, Gingrich stepped down from his speaker’s post and from Congress.

Then came President [George W. Bush](#), a “compassionate conservative,” code for big spender, who added a prescription drug benefit to an already overburdened Medicare system. A couple of wars, a big tax cut, a financial crisis, a deep recession and bailouts galore, and pretty soon the Republican Revolution was just a memory.

The history of the Contract offers important lessons for Boehner & Co.

First, if you don’t aim high you probably won’t get off the ground.

Second, ideas alone are insufficient to effect change. It takes “skills and enthusiasm and staying power,” said Samples, who examined these issues in his [book](#), “The Struggle to Limit Government: A Modern Political History.” It also takes allies in the Senate and White House.

And third, remember you are fighting against politicians’ strong self-preservation instinct. If you can’t make the tough choices today, you can always follow in the great tradition of Congresses past: leave the problem for your successors.

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