Would it make much difference if the House of Representatives were controlled by the Republican Party instead of the Democrats who have run it since January 1955? Policy Review asked Robert H. Michel, Republican minority leader, what he would do differently if he were Speaker of the House. We similarly asked ranking Republican members of more than a dozen committees and subcommittees what they would do differently if they became chairman of their committee or subcommittee. Lawrence Coughlin, ranking Republican on the transportation appropriations subcommittee, said he was happy with the way the Democrats ran his subcommittee and would do nothing to change it. Most other Republicans we invited declined to respond. We print responses from Minority Leader Michel, Dick Armey, ranking Republican on the Joint Economic Committee, and William F. Goodling, ranking Republican on the House Education and Labor Committee.

ROBERT H. MICHEL

...As Speaker Robert H. Michel received the gavel symbolizing his new office he told his colleagues, "from now on we will do unto ourselves what we have heretofore done unto others." Michel referred to the fact that the House is not subject to a wide-ranging number of laws, from the Social Security Act of 1935 to the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1988, including the Freedom of Information Act and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. "The House will under my speakership be obliged to abide by all the laws, rules, and regulations that we impose upon the American people legislatively," Michel said.

A fantasy? Perhaps, but I believe the public's disgust with the way Congress operates makes it possible for the first time in many years for a Republican majority to be formed in the House of Representatives. Overgrown staffs and underhanded procedures, irresponsible budgets and irrational schedules, the arrogance of unlimited power and the power of unchecked privileges—these are the legacy of Democratic control of the House of Representatives for 55 of the past 59 years.

House Republicans claim no monopoly on legislative or ethical virtue, but we alone can provide the will and the vision to rid the House of decades of institutional decay and decline, and create a new Hill order. The Democrats have had their chance, and have failed.

A Republican majority would embark on a truly conservative revolution in the House, for our goal would be to restore the institutional virtues that have been lost, preserve the strengths that have survived, and direct the energies of the House to enhance and protect traditional American values.

As Speaker of the House, I would in the first 100 days lay out a program for broad, comprehensive reform of the House's procedures and practices, and guarantee prompt and expeditious consideration of all the great issues of the day. A Republican-controlled House would work with a Republican president, not thwart his efforts, as the Democratic majority has done on every major issue from the war in the Gulf to a highway bill.

But exciting as such a program might seem, it would be impossible to pass unless Republicans first take control of the legislative machinery of the House.

While the often volatile nature of the legislative process does not always lend itself to the managerial disciplines of business, there is absolutely no excuse for the House to be the kind of bureaucratic monstrosity it has become.

In the 35 years I have been a congressman—all as a member of the minority—the House has changed from a relatively small and efficient institution into a chaotic, bureaucratic empire of 11,000 staff members, and 1,800 support staff, including shademakers, venetian blind technicians, and upholsterers, not to mention 27 committees and 136 subcommittees.

The congressional staff—House and Senate—is nine times larger than the second-largest legislative staff in the world, that of the Canadian parliament. In 1960, three years after I became a member, the legislative budget was $131 million. In 1990, it was $2.24 billion—an increase of 1,610 percent.

As a majority, Republicans would cut committee staffs
in half, which would save at least $26 million. We would get rid of most of the select committees and drastically reduce the number of subcommittees.

In order to make the House more responsive I would insure that all controversial bills come to the floor with rules guaranteeing free and open debate. One of the worst outrages of Democratic Party domination has been its insistence upon closed or semi-closed rules, effectively disenfranchising millions of Americans, who lose the chance to have their representatives offer amendments. When I first came to the House, civil rights bills were debated for days, not hours. In 1985, 85 percent of all rules were open rules. By 1990, that figure had fallen to 45 percent. The phrase “free and open debate” becomes meaningless when the chance for such debate is effectively eliminated by closed rules.

I would also establish a more orderly schedule for the consideration of legislation. The current process of doing very little in the early part of the year and then cramming important legislation into the very end of the schedule is not conducive to thoughtful legislating.

If all of these reforms strike some as being “merely” structural or procedural changes, I can only say that in the House, structure determines process, form dictates substance, and procedure shapes outcomes.

The cancer eating at the House is the inability or unwillingness on the part of the Democrats to undertake a comprehensive House reform, from the rules that govern the House to the rules that govern our elections.

The reforms that the House needs are varied, and I have touched on just a few of them. As Speaker of the House I would have the scope—and the majority—to undertake the first comprehensive reform of Congress in modern times. I look forward to it.

ROBERT H. MICHEL, of Illinois, is minority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives.

DICK ARMEN

As a professional economist, I’d relish the challenge of chairing Congress’s Joint Economic Committee, and would assume the position acutely aware of the need to reform this committee. In light of the recent election returns from New Jersey, where the Democratic majority in both state house and senate were shown the door by tax-weary voters, there’s some hope that in the next Congress this question may become more than simply rhetorical. In the meantime, I’ll look at it from the perspective of “king for a day,” and here’s how I’d work from morning ’til night.

9 A.M.—Breakfast with the 44-member staff to tell a dozen of them they’ll need to find gainful employment elsewhere. Like most congressional committees, the JEC is overstuffed. I’d reduce the staff size and use the budget savings to purchase better computer hardware and software to enable the professional economists to conduct sound analysis.

Once the committee was properly staffed and
equipped, I would work to make it the source of some of the most respected economic analysis in Washington, rather than a forum for the politics of the majority party. The staff would have to understand that this is not the Joint Political Committee, but the Joint Economic Committee, and they should go about their jobs accordingly.

Pro-Growth Proposals

10:30—Meet with the other majority members of the committee to outline the issues we can most directly affect. The JEC does not write legislation, authorize or appropriate spending, and has no oversight authority. It is the closest thing to a "think tank" inside Congress, and its members are freed from the nuts-and-bolts detail work that consumes so much time and energy on other committees. It should deal in the realm of ideas, and its unique mandate should be exploited to explore economic notions.

With a Republican majority, the JEC could lead the way in pursuing desperately needed regulatory and economic reforms. Pro-growth tax proposals such as an indexed and progressively preferential capital gains rate, privatization, regulatory reform, freer labor laws, a free market in agriculture and communications, reform of entitlement spending, and freer world trade are all issues that could be explored if control of Congress were wrested from the Democrats and the special-interest groups to which they are beholden.

Nascent economic ideas like gold-backed bonds or the negative income tax could be examined just out of curiosity. In the first 10 months of 1991, the committee Democrats held 48 hearings, well over one per week. Just about all of them merely rehashed tired rhetoric from other standing committees.

The impact that historically high taxation as a percentage of the gross national product has on our economy, stifling regulations in the communications industry, and antiquated labor laws that serve more to enhance the well-being of lawyers than workers would all make for interesting hearings. While hearings like this would be less frequent, the committee's economists would produce more studies, reports, and economic analyses.

Noon—Lunch with the Ranking Democrat (that has a nice ring to it) to discuss minority rights on the JEC, agreeing on the ways in which we'll disagree. Free and open debate is good for the process, and the minority members would be provided two weeks' notice for hearings and allowed one witness for every two the majority party provides.

Any study or report issued in the name of the Joint Economic Committee would include views from the Democrats in the minority. (Today, Republicans have to resort to separate minority reports.) The best thing Republicans can do is put our economic policies and ideas right next to those of the Democrats and let the public decide which are better.

Disavowing Flawed Studies

2 P.M.—Press conference to set the record straight on past exposures from the JEC that turned out to be inaccurate, starting by disavowing a series of JEC studies and press releases issued by then-chairman David Obey in 1985 and 1986.

These studies purported to show the loss of millions of manufacturing jobs, the creation of mostly low-paying jobs in the '80s, and a big boost in wealth for those in the top income bracket. Unfortunately, these studies were riddled with factual inaccuracies, and were misleading to boot. The infamous wealth study, for example, contained a $2-trillion error, the largest in congressional history, and the JEC is still reeling from this blow to its credibility.

On another occasion, JEC Democrats leaked confidential, but erroneous, data on manufacturing jobs to the Washington Post. Only when confronted at a hearing did the chairman admit that the report was leaked, and furthermore that it was riddled with inaccuracies. Regrettably, the transcript of the public hearing, with its embarrassing revelations, has never been published. As chairman, I would not allow such public information to be suppressed.

Dynamic Analysis

3:30—Call Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Archer (R-TX) to discuss the need for dynamic economic analysis of tax proposals. As the primary sponsor of a capital-gains rate reduction, Bill knows that tax initiatives that lead to job creation are a net revenue gain for the federal treasury.

The current revenue-estimating process relies on "static" models, which view the economy as a finite pie to be cut and distributed. Proponents of static revenue estimates fail to realize that taxes affect the size of the pie, that tax incentives such as a preferential capital-gains rate make the pie grow, and $160 billion in new taxes like those contained in the last budget deal make the pie shrink.

By ignoring such real economic effects, government budget forecasters consistently overestimate the revenue gain from a tax increase while discounting the economic growth generated by a tax cut. Since government spending is based not on actual receipts but on projected revenue, the Congressional Budget Office must constantly adjust its deficit projections upward, with the latest such "technical reestimate" lowering revenue projections (and thus raising deficit projections) by $77 billion over the next six years. Of course, there really is no "technical reestimate" of revenues, as this figure is simply the residual after known deficit factors are accounted for.

Forcing a redefinition of the way the government goes about projecting the effects of taxation would help the JEC reclaim its once prominent position as a focus of economic initiative on Capitol Hill.

6:30—Meet with the chairman of the president's Council of Economic Advisers to discuss the direction of the economy. Because the JEC was established in 1946 as the legislative equivalent of the president's CEA, a little dialogue between us would be healthy.

Under the current division of government, contact between the administration and the committee's majority is limited to testimony on the Hill, on which occasions the Democrats flog administration officials before the cameras of C-SPAN. If Republicans controlled
Congress and the White House, the interaction could be much more productive.

Together, the JEC and the CEA could press for better data from agencies such as the Congressional Budget Office, the Joint Committee on Taxation, and the Departments of Commerce and Labor. For Congress and the administration to make sound economic decisions requires a good database. Unfortunately, much of our database is antiquated because it was designed to measure the economy of America's past, not its present and future economy.

DICK ARMEY, of Texas, is the ranking Republican on the Joint Economic Committee.

WILLIAM F. GOODLING

A former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Joe Cannon, once said, "The pendulum will swing back." I look forward to the day it does. There are many things I would do differently were I chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee.

To begin with, the committee would be run with less staff—perhaps a third less—and at lower cost. We have learned to effectively make do with less as the minority in Congress since Eisenhower's presidency and I would apply those same principles of efficiency to Republicans in a majority.

While it would be tempting to adopt the same rules of convenience presently used by the majority, government must represent all Americans. I have often seen instances when we in the minority have strengthened laws that have been reported by this committee. I would enhance, rather than limit, the ability of the minority to play that role.

Similarly, a more rational approach to the legislative process needs to be adopted. For example, committee members should be given five days to review any legislation in advance of a vote. They should also be required to cast their vote in person, or not at all. Both of these requirements would add to the quality of committee deliberations.

Are Our Labor Laws Working?

Moving to the labor field, many individuals come to Congress thinking the best way to make a name for themselves is to introduce and quickly pass controversial legislation. Unfortunately, this attitude prevents a thorough exploration of whether a problem is serious enough to demand a federal solution, or whether the legislation even properly addresses the perceived problem. While this criticism can be accurately directed at Congress as a whole, it is most obviously applicable in the labor field, where partisan emotions and slogans often take the place of rational debate.

One of my first initiatives as chairman of the Education and Labor Committee would, therefore, be to expand the oversight responsibilities of the committee to explore—through hearings—the question of how well the laws we pass are working. Do they accomplish what they were intended to accomplish? What problems have been created, perhaps foreseeable at the time of passage, that need to be addressed? Similarly, I would encourage more deliberative hearings in evaluating the merits of legislation before passing laws in the first place.

I would also encourage cooperation among government, labor, and business wherever possible in labor legislation. This approach has worked well in programs such as the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), and could do much to ensure the optimal efficiency and effectiveness of our labor laws and policies.

I would also work to cover Congress under all labor laws; the institution may learn a few things if it is forced to comply with the laws we impose on the rest of society.

These may seem mundane, obvious concepts; unfortunately, they are rarely followed on Capitol Hill. Indeed, the hearings that do occur are usually orchestrated toward some pre-ordained result—such as placing the administration in the worst possible light—rather than a balanced, objective analysis of what is going on in the real world.

Bipartisan Education Policy

In contrast to federal labor policy, Republicans and Democrats have tended to work in a bipartisan fashion on education policy. As a result, I have been generally pleased with the education laws enacted during my tenure on the committee.

Even so, looking to the future, if I were setting the committee's education agenda, I would begin to move in a new direction. President Bush and Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander have both been preaching the need to take a hard look at our nation’s schools and to make fundamental changes in the way they operate. The president and secretary are building upon a grass-roots movement that is pressing our schools to deliver better education to all students.

The implications of this movement for the committee and Congress are profound. We need to move beyond, but not abandon, programs that serve targeted populations and define a federal role geared toward improving all schools for all students.

A top priority would be to develop national education goals and standards without losing the strength of local control and diversity. I would also try to use the limited federal dollars that go into education to leverage change at the state and local level. Finally, I would make a major effort to amend current laws so education and other human development programs could be coordinated more easily at the local level. This could be accomplished by allowing state and local programs more flexibility in running programs so long as the goals of the programs continue to be met.

WILLIAM F. GOODLING, of Pennsylvania's 19th district, is ranking minority member on the House Committee on Education and Labor.