

CHANGING HOUSE LEADERSHIP

The past two weeks on Capitol Hill have been crucial weeks for members of Congress, particularly the Democratic majority. The scandal involving powerful House Administration Committee Chairman Wayne Hays seems to have precipitated a series of events which will alter the Democratic leadership, both in terms of its membership as well as the role it plays in the House. In this week's column, I would like to address the question of the Hays scandal and examine the important shifts now taking place in the House leadership system.

Hays-Ray Scandal

Most Members of Congress share the outrage of their constituents about the Wayne Hays-Elizabeth Ray affair. Their outrage is not necessarily based on a moral evaluation of the quality of Representative Hays' personal life, but rather on the alleged misuse of public funds. What aggravates most tax-paying Americans is the possibility that their hard-earned tax dollars might have been used for the personal pleasures of a Member of Congress instead of the business of the nation. Members of Congress, of course, believe that the Hays affair reflects poorly on them and jeopardizes their positions in Congress. At this turning point, House Democrats need leadership to guide the course of events which lead to justice and at the same time keep the Democratic party in tact. Fortunately, House Majority Leader Thomas "Tip" O'Neill, Jr. has played a powerful leadership role in this affair.

Tip O'Neill As House Leader

O'Neill, now an unchallenged candidate for the House Speakership, acted decisively in calling for the resignation of Rep. Hays from his Campaign Committee and Administration Committee Chairmanships pending the outcome of an Ethics Committee investigation. O'Neill has made it clear that Democrats in Congress will not tolerate misconduct at the taxpayers' expense, whether it comes from a Republican President or a powerful Democratic House Chairman. In a very real sense, Tip O'Neill has taken over the leadership of the Democrats in Congress and acted as defacto Speaker. The announcement of House Speaker Carl Albert this week that he would not seek re-election has firmly cemented O'Neill's position as Party leader and heir apparent to the position of Speaker of the House.

The Wayne Hays affair is important in a discussion of the changing Democratic leadership because it has dramatized the role of the House leadership and acted as a background for Members of Congress to see what kind of leadership they might expect from certain members of Congress. Retiring House Speaker Carl Albert, for instance, met with Rep. Hays after news of the scandal broke. Albert emerged from that meeting with the announcement that he had not taken action; said Albert, "Rep. Hays was very depressed, and I do not want to add to his depression at this time." This is typical of the lack of leadership which Democratic Freshmen protested earlier in the session.

O'Neill, on the other hand, met with Hays and urged him to relinquish his Committee Chairmanships. Following that meeting, O'Neill told reporters confidently, "I presume that he will announce that he is stepping aside from the House Administration Chairmanship as well. (Hays had already stepped aside in the House Campaign Committee.) There is no way he can satisfy the Membership without relinquishing both posts."

Most Democrats are pleased that O'Neill will succeed to the position of Speaker of the House. Since 1971 when O'Neill assumed the post of House Majority Leader, he has been a driving and unifying force within the Democratic party in Congress. This was most clearly evidenced during the months preceding the resignation of Richard Nixon. In a New York Magazine feature article, O'Neill was "the man who could push Richard Nixon over the edge." O'Neill deftly organized the Congressional timetable of events, making sure that Congress moved precisely and cautiously through investigations and Judiciary Committee hearings. Boston Globe reporter Martin Nolan, at that time, quoted one moderate Republican as saying, "I wish Tip was our leader. If he was Nixon's floor leader, he'd go to him and say 'Mr. President, it's time we decided to cut our losses. The way things are going, you're going to have to worry about going to jail. If you resign soon, you'll probably be able to escape prison.' Now Tip could say that because Nixon, like everyone else, respects his political judgement and respects his arithmetic."

Speaker of the House

O'Neill has a history of powerful leadership. As the first Democratic Speaker of the Massachusetts House, he was known to systematically remove Committee Chairmen who did not follow his leadership. He was also known to have ordered the doors to the legislative chambers locked to prevent weak legislators from leaving the floor on critical votes. Clearly, O'Neill would not have the same liberties in the United States Congress as he had in the Massachusetts legislature. However, he continues to carry through his leadership responsibilities with strength and integrity. This is the kind of leadership which is sorely needed among House Democrats.

Leadership Candidates

The vote on House leadership positions will take place in December. O'Neill is not expected to encounter a fight for the position of Speaker of the House. There will be a contest, however, for the position of House Majority Leader, which O'Neill is vacating. Thus far, Democratic Majority Whip John McFall has announced his candidacy for the position of House Majority Leader. Other candidates for that post include Democratic Caucus Chairman Phillip Burton of California and Senior Rules Committee member Richard Bolling of Missouri. Nine-term Indiana Democrat John Brademas has announced his candidacy for House Majority Whip, the position left open by Rep. McFall who is seeking the Majority Leadership job.

Candidates for leadership roles among House Democrats will be watched closely by fellow Members of Congress. Democrats in Congress need a strong voice and a solidifying force. Hopefully, the 95th Congress will emerge with both.