

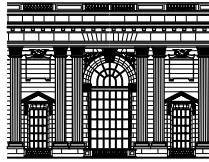
# CHAPTER FIVE



*Majority Leader Trent Lott and Senate Republicans hold a press conference on the Balanced Budget Amendment following a Policy Committee luncheon.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

# An Agenda for Change (1985-1997)



*[The Republican Policy Committee during the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations, under chairmen William Armstrong (1985-1991), Don Nickles (1991-1996), and Larry Craig (1996- ).]*

**D**uring its first fifty years, the Republican Policy Committee often operated in an atmosphere of divided government. As the committee's functions evolved, its emphasis changed depending on whether the party held the majority in the Senate and whether Republican presidents occupied the White House. In the 1980s and 1990s, shifting political circumstances caused the Policy Committee to adjust its role in response. From 1981 to 1993, it defended the Republican administrations of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, while Democrats for six of those twelve years controlled both houses of Congress. In 1993, the Policy Committee shifted into opposition to a Democrat in the White House and Democratic majorities in Congress.

The 1994 election returned Republicans to the majority in the Senate and for the first time in forty years gave Republicans control of the House of Representatives as well. Each phase saw strategic adjustments and bold use of new technology to advance the party's message and agenda.

## **1985: Senator Armstrong Takes the Helm**

Following Senator John Tower's retirement from the Senate in 1984, Colorado Senator William Armstrong (who served in the Senate from 1979 to 1991) was elected chairman of the Republican Policy Committee without opposition. Armstrong's own election to the Senate in 1978 had marked a reversal of fortunes for Republicans in the West. He defeated the Democratic incumbent who himself had defeated former Policy Committee Chairman Gordon Allott six years earlier. In the Senate, Armstrong served on the Banking and Finance committees, becoming during President Reagan's first term a leading spokesman for cutting federal subsidies and reducing the deficit. He sponsored a constitutional amendment to balance the budget and promoted a mandatory three-fifths vote to increase the national debt. As Policy Committee chairman, Armstrong began the practice of opening the weekly luncheons with a blessing.<sup>1</sup>

## **Taking Advantage of Technology**

During the 1980s, both the Policy Committee and the Republican Conference grew more concerned with electronic media. The Conference shifted its primary focus from print to broadcasting, acquiring a television camera to record senators' reactions to President Reagan's State of the Union message and other events for broadcast in the senators' home states. The journalist Hedrick Smith noted that from 1982 to 1986, Republican media operations went "from nothing to sending out 4,032 satellite feeds for senators." The system also permitted senators to conduct live two-way press conferences and town meetings with cable viewers in





*Senator William L. Armstrong (R-CO).*



their home states. Similarly, Policy Committee Chairman Armstrong, having started as a radio announcer and broadcasting executive, demonstrated a keen sense of the media. “He knows how to contribute quotable and resonant comment for broadcast news,” observed *Politics in America*.<sup>2</sup>

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After the Senate began televising its floor proceedings gavel-to-gavel in 1986, the Republican Policy Committee expanded its own in-house television operations. The Policy Committee explored ways to broadcast Senate floor information over the in-house Capitol TV cable system. Initially, the Policy Committee planned a “bulletin

board” that would broadcast messages to Republican offices about the floor schedule and explanation of pending amendments. Rather than scramble the signal so that only Republicans could receive the service, they decided to make it available to anyone who had access to the Capitol cable system. After a practice period, RPC-TV began formal broadcasting on July 20, 1987.<sup>3</sup>

Within a week, complaints from Democratic senators—who did not yet have a similar service—prompted the Senate Rules Committee to order a halt to the Republican Policy Committee’s television broadcasting. The Rules Committee argued that Senate rules prohibited the use of the Senate Cable System for political purposes, particularly outside the Senate. The Policy Committee responded that its broadcasts fully complied with the rules, since they could be received only within the Senate and were limited to factual briefings on Senate floor actions. Policy Committee staff director Robert Potts maintained that the RPC “Floor News” was “a good service and worth fighting to keep going.” Eventually, the Rules Committee reversed itself and authorized resumption of the broadcasts. Thereafter, four Policy Committee staff members provided around-the-clock, up-to-the-minute explanations of Senate floor action direct to the offices of senators and their staffs. Those tuning in to





*Republican Policy Committee hearing room also serves as the office for staff.*

RPC-TV got the Senate schedule, descriptions of bills and amendments, voting information, and parliamentary explanations; the service also provided bulletins on meetings, updates on committee hearings, and news alerts concerning Congress and the White House. This innovative use of technology assisted senators in keeping up with floor proceedings and reduced the need for so many staffers to come to the floor or cloakroom for information.<sup>4</sup>

Potts, who previously had been Senator Armstrong's administrative assistant, also expanded the Policy Committee's use of computers and required the staff to undergo training to use them effectively.

At the same time, Senator Armstrong continued to hold the Policy Committee's regular Tuesday lunches, which had served the party so well during its years in the minority. The lunches gave Republican senators the opportunity to meet together in the same room to share ideas, to suggest strategy, and to build party unity. Armstrong won credit for conducting the lunches in a fair and exemplary manner.<sup>5</sup>

Having assumed the Policy Committee chairmanship at the start of President Reagan's second term, Senator Armstrong believed that contacts between the Policy Committee and the Reagan administration had

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been too limited. He and Potts initiated a series of biweekly lunches for Republican administrative assistants and staff directors, to which top pollsters and political consultants, the chief of staff of the presi-

dent, the vice president, and cabinet officers were invited to make presentations. This gave Reagan administration officials a chance to meet with Republican senators and staff, and enabled them to send messages back to the White House.

Despite his popularity on Capitol Hill and with Colorado voters, Senator Armstrong chose not to run for a third term in 1990. "I have always seen myself as a citizen legislator," he explained. "It seems to me that twelve years is about the right length of time for a member of Congress." Armstrong concluded his Senate career by leading the opposition to the 1990 tax hike—against the wishes of his own president—with the Republican Policy Committee staff contributing ammunition for the fight.<sup>6</sup>

## **Chairman Nickles: Promoting the Republican Message**

In 1991, Oklahoma Senator Don Nickles (who began his Senate service in 1981) won the chairmanship of the Republican Policy Committee. Nickles first appointed his administrative assistant, Rick Lawson, as staff director, and in 1992, following Lawson's decision to return to the private







*Senator Don Nickles (R-OK).*



sector, chose fellow Oklahoman Kelly Johnston for the post. Johnston admitted that despite having worked for three Representatives and having served on the staff of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, he knew little about the Policy Committee. Consulting with other Republican staff, he concluded that the Policy Committee possessed potential that had never been fully utilized. The chairman and his staff director then sought ways to raise the committee's profile.<sup>7</sup>

Senator Nickles wanted to make the Policy Committee more of a force in the public arena, in ways consistent with its original mission. He observed that, while the Policy Committee had always assisted in coordinating and facilitating policy and doing research for the leadership, it had relied on others to promote the Republican message. Finding more direct access to the media became one of the committee's new priorities, and staff focused new attention on reaching editorial writers and other print journalists likely to give extensive and more thoughtful treatment to policy issues. The committee sought to become an initial point of reference for reporters on Capitol Hill.<sup>8</sup>

The Policy Committee staff shifted to producing briefer, short-term papers on themes or messages that Republican senators could use in dealing with the press. Seeking to make the committee more ingrained in the party's leadership operations, Senator Nickles wanted the committee's output to be noticed and used. "Our primary audience for our papers is Republican senators and their staffs," noted the Policy Committee's annual report. "However, the Committee has made it a practice to make its publications available to the media and to interested private-sector parties upon request."<sup>9</sup>

## Other New and Expanded Services

"Our lives changed early in 1993 when we lost the White House and the Administration to the other party for the first time in 12 years," commented Senator Nickles. "It placed new burdens on the Policy Committee, as all of us have strived to meet our challenges as leaders of



the opposition during a time of heavier workloads and tightened budgets on Capitol Hill.” While the committee’s budget remained constant, its output increased markedly. The 141 publications that the staff produced in 1992 rose to 260 in 1993. Policy Committee publications included the *Legislative Notice*, *Record Vote Analysis*, *Policy Analysis*, *Issue Alert*, *Reality Check*, *Regulation Watch*, and the *RPC Monday Floorcast*, a one-page summary of anticipated business during the coming week. During the 104th Congress, the Policy Committee also operated a daily news clip service, modeled after the Pentagon’s “Early Bird” service. The clippings, including an assortment of articles, editorials, and polls from a cross-section of major daily newspapers, were hand-delivered to GOP offices each morning that the Senate was in session.<sup>10</sup>

Without a Republican administration, the Policy Committee was freer to act. Yet freedom from supporting presidential programs carried responsibility to devise a legislative agenda and make it work.

Being in the minority made Republican senators more receptive to approaches to get their message out. The Policy Committee now cohosted with the Republican Conference a Monday morning televised information program, broadcast on the Senate Cable System. Since 1988, the committee had operated a telephone hotline with a digest of Senate floor activities, summary of the previous day’s events, the upcoming agenda, recess schedules, and related House activities. It also used the “autofax” to provide timely legislative information, alerting senators to late-breaking news, updated amendments and other Senate floor activity, and to provide quick response to President Bill Clinton’s legislative initiatives. The *Record Vote*



*The Republican Policy Committee’s cable television channel headquarters in the Capitol, ST-57.*

*Analysis*, which the Policy Committee had been compiling since 1947, now became available electronically in an on-line data-bank. The Policy Committee also stood among the first Senate offices to develop a “home page” on the Internet’s World Wide Web in 1995, to make available its publications on-line inside and outside the Senate.<sup>11</sup>

The Policy Committee staff began holding seminars for new legislative staff members, particularly for the staffs of freshmen senators. They also held issue forums and roundtable discussions for senators and continued to host weekly meetings for staff directors and legislative directors.<sup>12</sup>



*Republican Policy Committee Web Site  
(<http://www.senate.gov/~rpc/>).*

## **Alternatives to Clinton Administration Proposals**

To deal with the Clinton administration’s legislative programs, Senator Nickles appointed an Economic Policy Task Force, co-chaired by the ranking Republicans on the Budget and Finance committees. Meeting weekly, the task force invited interested senators to hear a variety of speakers and to discuss such economic issues as NAFTA, the federal budget, and ways of stimulating economic growth. Officials of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations addressed the task force, which drew an average of fifteen Republican senators each week.<sup>13</sup>

The Clinton health reform proposals galvanized the Policy Committee into action. “We helped to arm GOP senators for battle by providing them fuller information about the costs and consequences of the various versions of the Administration proposal,” said Chairman Nickles, “which would have resulted in a government takeover of our Nation’s health care system.” The Policy Committee sought to coordinate communications between senators, the floor, press, outside interest groups, and

citizens. The Policy Committee acted as a rapid response team to raise new questions and to allow Republican senators to respond quickly to the various aspects of Clinton's bill. During this protracted debate, the Policy Committee staff held twice-daily strategy sessions, wrote reports to provide ready ammunition for the debate, hosted a "Republican Health Care University" and other forums, tracked the floor debate, worked with the Republican floor leader, issued analytical studies, and maintained a comprehensive library on health care issues. In addition, the Policy Committee created a "Health Care Fax" that offered "talking points" to all Republican Senate offices and to the press. Defeating the Clinton health care plan was a major factor in the Republican party's success in recapturing the majorities in both the Senate and the House of Representatives in 1994.<sup>14</sup>

## 1995: Return to the Majority

When the Senate returned to Republican control in 1995, the Policy Committee assisted the task forces appointed by Majority Leader Bob Dole (senator from Kansas from 1969 to 1996). The Policy Committee also compiled background materials on the Whitewater scandal and other accusations against the Clinton White House. The committee held forums in which former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and Lawrence Eagleburger briefed senators on the situation in Bosnia and in other problem areas abroad.<sup>15</sup>

The existence of a Republican majority in the House of Representatives, for the first time since 1955, inspired unprecedented cooperative efforts between the leadership of the two houses. In November, the Senate and House Republican Policy Committees held their first joint hearing. The issue was balancing the budget, and several economists highlighted the advantages of ending massive federal deficits. The Senate and House policy committees issued jointly produced papers under the letterhead of both committees. The two committees also began faxing to Republican offices and the press daily joint talking points on the budget. Such cooperation "helped ensure a more single, succinct message."<sup>16</sup>





*Republican leadership following Majority Leader Dole's retirement: Senators Larry E. Craig (R-ID), Connie Mack (R-FL), Don Nickles (R-OK), Trent Lott (R-MS), Thad Cochran (R-MS), Al D'Amato (R-NY), and Strom Thurmond (R-SC).*

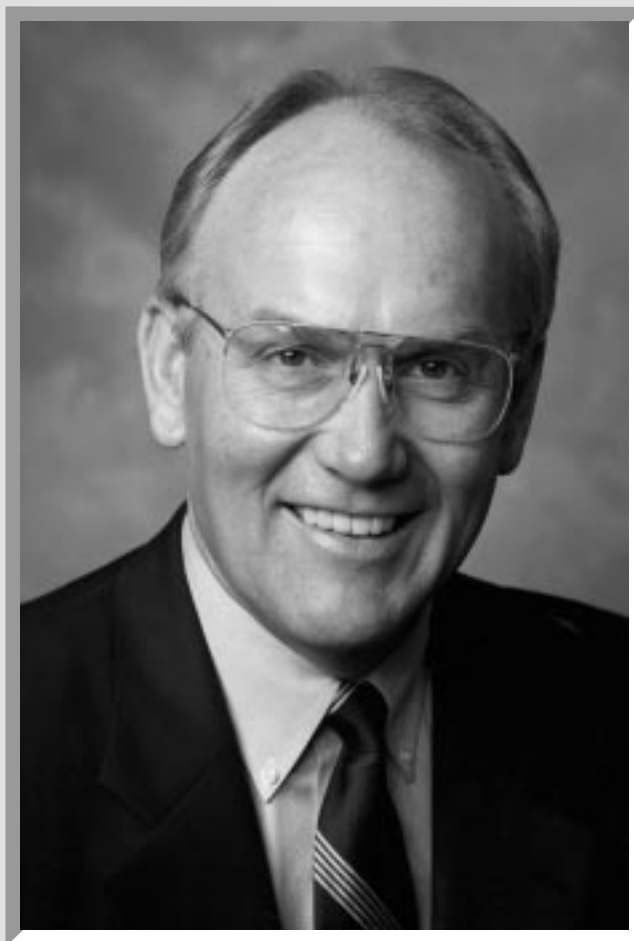
As the majority, Republicans could set the legislative agenda, and they made the most of the opportunity. The Republican Policy Committee produced more than 270 position papers, issued on an “as-needed” basis and tied to pending legislation from welfare reform to taxes. The Policy Committee also worked to be “the guardian of GOP interests.” During the 1990s, Senate Republicans forged a remarkable cohesiveness, standing together first to protect President George Bush’s vetoes from being overridden or to prevent cloture from being invoked, and later to enact Republican-sponsored legislation during the Clinton administration. Chairman Nickles encouraged the Policy Committee staff to make every effort to be part of the Senate’s decision-making process and to avoid publishing anything that might break away from Senator Dole’s leadership. Noting that the Policy Committee had always had a separate leadership function and the right to act independently (and had done so in the past), Nickles insisted that the committee not work at cross purposes with the floor leader.<sup>17</sup>

## Senator Craig Becomes the Tenth Chairman

Bob Dole's resignation from the Senate on June 11, 1996, to become the Republican candidate for president set in motion a series of Republican leadership changes. Senator Trent Lott (senator from Mississippi since 1989) became majority leader, Don Nickles was elected assistant majority leader, and Larry E. Craig (senator from Idaho since 1991) was elected chairman of the Policy Committee. As had occurred in the past, the new chairman applied his own personal priorities and style to the Policy Committee, while continuing many of the services and practices that Senate Republicans depended upon. Senator Craig became the first chairman to serve under a new Republican Conference rule that took effect at the beginning of the 105th Congress, setting a six-year limit on the terms of party leaders except for the Republican leader and president pro tempore. Craig appointed Jade West as the first woman to serve as staff director of the Republican Policy Committee.<sup>18</sup>

Senators Lott and Craig expanded the use of task forces, appointed by the leader and operating under the general supervision of the Policy Committee. By providing staff and monitoring the work of the various task forces, the Policy Committee was able to enlarge and redesign its role as a policy entity. Many of the press and communications functions that had developed over the past decade were now consolidated by the Republican Conference. This allowed the Policy staff to continue to concentrate on position papers, ranging from short, timely briefing papers to longer, more in-depth analyses. Maintaining the popular *Legislative Notices*, the staff also continued its work drafting policy papers on issues outside the legislative process, and also tracked actions by the Clinton Administration to keep senators and staff informed of regulatory actions or accounts in the media on various issues. Simultaneous with the introduction of the first ten bills in the Republican agenda at the opening of the 105th Congress, policy papers were issued on each bill. Expanding its electronic services, the committee also made its papers available on the





*Senator Larry E. Craig (R-ID).*





Internet, and on a newly established Republican Intranet (dubbed the “Trunk Line”), with a searchable data base.<sup>19</sup>

The Republican Policy Committee participated in the orientation programs for new senators in 1997, coordinating the leadership orientation programs for the new Republican freshman class. The committee also offered a series of orientations for staff, helping newcomers to the Hill to understand Senate practices and procedures. The committee staff worked with the Secretary of the Senate and the Sergeant-at-Arms to host an unprecedented briefing on the Senate floor, where three hundred new (and not so new) Republican staffers were introduced to the functions of the officers of the Senate and the duties of the floor staff.<sup>20</sup>





*Senator Larry E. Craig (R-ID) addresses a Republican Policy Committee luncheon. Seated to his right are Conference Chairman Connie Mack (R-FL) and Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-MS).*

# Fifty Years of Service

**D**uring the Republican Policy Committee's first fifty years, the recurring question was whether it had lived up to its potential. In the years after Robert Taft's chairmanship, the Policy Committee no longer

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*By its fiftieth anniversary, the Policy Committee had demonstrated a remarkable ability to adjust to the demands of the political marketplace.*

set policy; yet it did assist in the formulation and promotion of policy in a myriad of ways. Like many other congressional entities, it grew from a group of nine senators supported by a handful of

staff members into a thriving operation staffed by a variety of experts, while still reflecting the views and priorities of the senators who served as its chairmen. The committee's ready embrace of new technology also suggested that it would continue to grow with the electronic revolution in communication, making the public and the media more aware of Republican positions. By its fiftieth anniversary, the Policy Committee had demonstrated a remarkable ability to adjust to the demands of the political marketplace. Its expanded mission involved outreach and education, first and foremost on Capitol Hill. By working directly with the senators, making sure that what they said was consistent, and by educating the journalists who report this information, the Policy Committee assisted Republican senators in setting policy, enacting legislation, and getting their message out. It was an accomplishment consistent with the goals that Robert Taft had set in founding the Policy Committee.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alan Ehrenhalt, ed., *Politics in America: Members of Congress in Washington and at Home* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1985), 233; Republican Policy Committee Minutes, January 22, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game: How Washington Works* (New York: Random House, 1988), 125, 130–131.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Potts memorandum to William Armstrong, July 28, 1987, Senate Republican Policy Committee.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*; *The Senate Republican Policy Committee Annual Report for 1994*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Gribbin Interview, November 4, 1996, Senate Historical Office.

<sup>6</sup> *Washington Post*, February 14, 1989; William L. Armstrong, “The Imperial Congress,” in David C. Treen, ed., *Can You Afford This House?* (Ottawa, IL: Green Hill Books, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Kelly Johnston Interview, July 29, 1996, Senate Historical Office.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*; *The Senate Republican Policy Committee Annual Report for 1994*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> *The Senate Republican Policy Committee Annual Report for 1993*, i–ii.

<sup>11</sup> *The Senate Republican Policy Committee Annual Report for 1994*, 20–21; *Annual Report for 1995*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> *The Senate Republican Policy Committee Annual Report for 1993*, 4–5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–13.

<sup>14</sup> *The Senate Republican Policy Committee Annual Report for 1994*, 3–6.

<sup>15</sup> *The Senate Republican Policy Committee Annual Report for 1995*, 5–6, 12, 19.

<sup>16</sup> *The Senate Republican Policy Committee Annual Report for 1995*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 21; Kelly Johnston Interview.

<sup>18</sup> *Washington Post*, July 28, 1995.

<sup>19</sup> Jade West Interview, January 22, 1997, Senate Historical Office.

<sup>20</sup> Democrats later hosted a separate briefing for their new staff.

