

# Liberal Caucus May Run wild

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Washington

By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The revolution transforming power realities inside the House of Representatives, faster than the outside world imagines, poses a threat that coming battles over tax reform and foreign trade will become orgies of legislative excess. The do-gooding reforms adopted by the House Democratic caucus in fact transfer root power from conservative-oriented House committee grandees particularly Rep. Wilbur D. Mills of Arkansas, the Ways and Means chairman, to the liberal-dominated caucus.

Expert at sensing the climate, on Capitol Hill, Mills has not fought these reforms but embraced them hinting to friends he might just let the House run wild and see how it likes it. But the White House and its conservative allies on Capitol Hill are not so nonchalant. If Mills is cut down as a restraining force, they fear a tax bill gutted by revenue-losing gimmicks and a trade bill festooned with protectionist baubles. They doubt House Democratic leaders can check the caucus.

The goal of the present revolution, of course, is not a tax-trade Bacchanalia but an end to the feudal system of power divided

among committee chairmen, instead concentrating it with Speaker Carl Albert of Oklahoma and the elected party leadership. From the beginning, Mills has been a principal target. Liberal reformers have always grumbled about his committee's awesome jurisdiction (taxes, tariffs, Social Security, welfare) and unique authority (power to send bills to the House floor under a "closed" rule barring amendments).

Albert's canny adviser, Rep. Richard Bolling of Missouri, is a longtime critic of Mills. Most important, Albert was miffed last November when some Mills allies tested the water for a possible Mills speakership. The result has been an amazingly swift assault on Mills' prerogatives. While Mills was nursing a back ailment in Kensett, Ark., last week, the Democratic caucus approved a major weakening of the closed rule. In effect, it provides that a simple majority vote of the caucus could open up previously inviolate trade and tax bills to multiple amendment.

Albert, majority leader Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill of Massachusetts and Bolling feel they can prevent excesses in the caucus. But nobody can be sure, and therein lies the basic question of the House revolution: does Speaker Albert control the caucus or does the caucus control Speaker Albert?

Nixon aides spin nightmarish tales of what might transpire under a liberal-controlled caucus, spurred on by Nader's Raiders and Common Cause, defying the leadership. Worse yet, they fear massive tax cuts, Social Security boosts and high tariffs pouring from a runaway caucus. Whether controllable or not, it is probable that the caucus will be making major legislative decisions.

But unlike many Ways and Means members, Mills does not seem apprehensive. He actually approved last week's momentous changes in advance. That's because Mills is no zealot flinging himself to death against an angry caucus majority. Still a figure of unmatched prestige in the House, he believes he can talk the caucus out of wholesale amendments. Or perhaps, he hints privately, he might not even try.

The result of a tax or trade bill open to amendment might teach the House a lesson. But the cost of such a lesson would be too high for the White House, which recalls that the last trade bill considered under open amendment — the infamous Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930 — was the forerunner of depression and world war. In the delicate international situation of 1973, President Nixon's aides envision the specter of lower taxes and higher tariffs emerging from a new King Caucus.

Most Democratic congressmen view this as ridiculously alarmist. Even if this is so, assault on Mills won't soon end. He is now trying to block a caucus-approved House rule intended to open his committee's sessions to the public — and hordes of lobbyists.

A select committee headed by Bolling might divide the vast Ways and Means jurisdiction. For 17 years, Mills has been the bulwark against unrestrained tax and tariff relief. Even his undisputed guile and ability to adjust to changing tides may be insufficient to preserve that role today if King Caucus is restored to his dictatorial old throne.