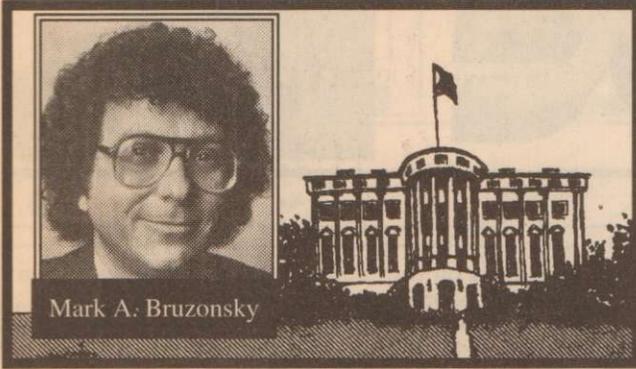


## From NO MATTER WHAT...CLAIM YOU WON!



Mark A. Bruzonsky

## Washington

Over the years I have been known as an optimist — always believing that better days will lie ahead. But, right now, I have serious concerns about the future of America if this tax-and-spend plan becomes law.

—Ronald Reagan

# 2 What victory

IN THE TOPSY-TURVY WORLD OF American politics, the Republicans and the Democrats are so used to taking turns beating up on one another that at times it seems that hardly anything else really matters here.

Thus the now comfortably retired Ronald Reagan, the spendthrift president who himself presided over the American Empire in the years that saw the US switched from being the world's largest creditor to its largest debtor, couldn't resist joining the fray in the days before the recent over-dramatic congressional vote on the first Clinton budget.

In a *New York Times* column with a title taking off on his wife Nancy's "Just Say No To Drugs" theme, Reagan loudly proclaimed *Just Say No To Clinton's Package*. He then went so far as the opening quote above indicates, as to call into question America's future — this the same Ronald Reagan who never uttered such a thought when he himself resided in the White House. It seems that after the dozen years of Reagan-Bush tutelage of the Republic, the always gregarious and inspiring actor-president deigned it was now his turn for scare and doom comments — obviously in hopes of permanently denting the Clinton presidency and bringing back a Republican conservative next time around.

The great Budget Debate of 1993 was really about the elections of 1994 and 1996. Far more than anything else, what should be seen as crucial issues involving nothing less than the very future of the nation are forced to take a back seat to crass and partisan positioning for the next electoral contest.

Consequently grand matters that truly do involve the well-being and health of the nation are more often than not subsumed into what has become an increasingly ever-present contest for power. Thus Ross Perot's still-growing appeal beyond party and right around big money continues to catch, more and more, all around the country.

Indeed, while the still new Democratic president prepared for his first vacation in four years on that little island of the rich and famous, Martha's Vineyard, Republican frontrunner Bob Dole was already "vacationing" up in New Hampshire, traditional site of the first presidential primary.

Those who might be thinking that that the budget debate of a few weeks ago is history

now have simply missed the point.

Since the White House really controlled the legislation and was always in a position to give and take whatever the president had to in order to get the budget bill passed — precisely what Bill Clinton did in full public glare — the real issue at stake was something else.

That something else was political positioning. And here, it seems to many, the Republicans were the ones who really triumphed.

Bill Clinton got his budget bill passed; but he did so only by expending tremendous energy, shedding lots of political blood, and once again promising just about everything to everyone.

The Clinton administration's debts over this legislation are going to be paid for over a very long time; and yet the legislation itself is more a patch-work, short-term, temporary fix than a real solution to the substantial economic problems facing American society.

The Republicans, meanwhile managed to position themselves once again as the anti-tax party, casting the Democrats as the "tax and spend" liberals.

No matter that it was the Republicans who spent America under throughout the 80s. Nevertheless, the very man who presided, none other than Ronnie Reagan himself, is now out there crying that the wolf is at the door.

No matter that the Republicans tend to tax the middle class more and the wealthy less, whereas the Democrats pride themselves in middle class tax breaks coupled with social programmes while raising tax rates on the well-to-do.

Imagery is far more powerful than fact these days. And more and more in American politics image-makers take top billing to policy experts. More and more concerns for reelection and for financing reelection campaigns become predominant concerns eclipsing all other considerations.

And so, out of the Great Budget Debate of 1993 the Republicans may well have gained the upper-hand.

It is they, the Republicans, who will be able to point fingers a year or two down the road when at best the American economy is likely to be still sluggish and the gigantic national

deficit is still headed up. "We told you so," they will gloat!

It is they, the Republicans, who will portray themselves as anti-government, anti-tax, and pro-business, pro-jobs at a time when in all likelihood the American standard of living will continue in decline. "We warned you about Bill Clinton and the 'tax and spenders'," they will shout.

It is they, the Republicans, who will be positioned to criticise against what is happening — just as the Democrats have done in recent years. They'll pull out all those Clinton promises. They'll make TV ads reminding all what the Democrats said they would do as opposed to what they have done. They'll come on strong reminding everyone that Bill Clinton, like Jimmy Carter before him, is a big-talker, a big-spender, and a big-taxer...but not someone you can count on to do what he promises or to lead the nation back to prosperity.

"When candidate Clinton promised to get this country moving, most Americans thought he meant forward. Instead, this administration has gone backward on the economy, backward on reducing government and backward on its promises." So wrote former president Reagan as he bashed Clinton in his *New York Times* op-ed page column while the congressional debate raged earlier this month.

And when the debate was over a few days later, while the Democratic president was loudly and repeatedly claiming victory everywhere he went — even while mourning the suicide of his top aide and dear friend Vince Foster — here's what one of Washington's senior analysts had to say:

"The White House speechwriters may have thought they were being clever when they suggested to President Clinton that he salute the hair-breadth passage of his budget and economic plan with the line, 'the margin was close but the mandate is clear'. Truth is, they did him no favours," wrote David Broder, this time on the op-ed page of *The Washington Post*.

"Whatever else it may be, this measure reflected no mandate — past, present or future. It is less a rallying point for congressional Democrats than a high wire over a political abyss."