

When the House Becomes a Hyatt

By ERIC SCHMITT

ONE of the first changes Newt Gingrich and the Republicans ordered after they took control of the House of Representatives last year was to end the daily early-morning delivery of 891 buckets of tea to House offices.

That saved the Government some \$500,000 a year. Maybe Mr. Gingrich's Republican revolution hasn't yielded much in the way of legislative results, but it has streamlined the housekeeping of the House.

Sell the Steamer Trunks

The lease, for instance, was canceled on a warehouse for storing lawmakers' furniture and the steamer trunks that were used when members of Congress still rode stagecoaches to Washington. That saved \$235,000 a year in rent. The furniture (including much of which had not been used in more than 20 years) was auctioned off for a \$149,000 profit. The House barber shop, beauty salon and shoeshine stand were turned over to private companies saving more than \$100,000 a year.

"It's not going to balance the budget," said Richard Shapiro, executive director of the Congressional Management Foundation, a private organization that tries to educate Congress on running its business. "But it's not so much the dollar savings. It shows a different way of approaching problems that hasn't been routinely practiced in Congress."

The most startling administrative changes have come from the House, where 25 percent of lawmakers have had experience in private business, one of the highest percentages that remain. Coming from corporate America, many key Representatives were appalled at the way Congress operated absolutely everything from restaurants to stationary stores, under one annual budget



Kenneth Stinson for The New York Times

The barber shop in the House of Representatives is now privately owned, unlike the Senate barber shop of \$671 million.

"You have business leaders making it to Congress who are bewildered by what's going on around them," said David King, an associate professor of public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government who has studied the House cleaning in the last 18 months.

To help Mr. Gingrich and his lieutenants, House leaders hired a stable of corporate turnaround artists and management experts who had experience in government and in Fortune 500 companies like Pitney Bowes, United Airlines and I.B.M.

Of this group, running the House and its more than 600 administrative employees (down from over 1,000 a year ago) was just like running a Hyatt Regency with 435

high-paying guests (called Representatives) who are all screaming for service yesterday. "We're like a convention center or convention hotel," said Scott M. Faulkner, who holds the newly created position of House chief administrative officer. "We're accountable to our constituents. If they're not happy, we're dead in the water."

Trying to make the House run like a giant hotel has upset more than 200 years of tradition and culture. And it hasn't come without some serious grumbling and glitches. A first-ever audit by Price Waterhouse last year found that lawmakers and their aides were overpaid \$1.2 million during a 15-month audit period. So, the handwritten ledgers dating from the Continental Congress were finally replaced with a new automated accounting system. It was just installed, four months late.

Many Democrats think the savings from the changes are exaggerated. "All they've done is shift the cost burden from central agencies to members' offices," said Representative Vic Fazio of California, the House's third-ranking Democrat.

Press Your Own Button

But House Republicans are pushing ahead and considering even more radical changes, eliminating the elevator operators who now whisk legislators to their appointed votes; turning the Botanic Garden at the base of Capitol Hill over to a private contractor; and putting the Congressional Record on CD-ROM instead of binding the annual 26 volumes (for a projected savings of \$1 million a year).

In a strange act of self-sacrifice, the Architect of the Capitol is paying Arthur Andersen, the consulting giant, \$90,000 to see whether private companies can landscape the Capitol grounds, clean Congress's halls and do the plumbing and carpentry cheaper and more efficiently than the Architect of the Capitol itself.

Ben Wimberly, a spokesman for the architect's office, explained, "The bottom line speaks loudly these days."