

Gephardt re-elected to lead Democrats

WASHINGTON (AP) — Cast into the minority for the first time in 40 years, House Democrats re-elected Rep. Richard Gephardt as their leader on Wednesday, brushing aside conservative pressure for a post-election shake-up.

"Our mission is to represent workers, middle-income families, the poor families of our country," Gephardt told reporters after he was installed by secret ballot at a party caucus. "I also look forward to winning the House back in 1996."

Gephardt, 53, easily turned back a challenge from Rep. Charlie Rose of North Carolina, 159-58, to keep the post he's held since 1989.

Rep. David Bonior of Michigan, seeking a new term as whip, the No. 2 job in the party hierarchy, turned back a challenge from Texas conservative Rep. Charles Stenholm.

While the elections fixed the party's leadership for the next two years, they could also accelerate the defection of one or more conservatives to the Republican Party. Conser-

vatives are "carefully monitoring where we go," said Rep. W.J. Tauzin of Louisiana, who met recently with Rep. Newt Gingrich, in line to become speaker in the Republican-controlled House next year.

Democrats insisted they could change their appeal to the voters without changing their leadership. "This is not a vote for the status quo," said Rep. Charles Schumer, a liberal from New York. "It was a vote for the people who can help us change."

Gephardt, who convened a series of private political discussions at a downtown hotel after the Democrats' Election Day debacle, is expected to announce changes in leadership organization designed to give conservatives a greater say.

Gephardt's triumph was marred by illness; he was forced to leave Bethesda Naval Hospital, where he had been admitted overnight for gall bladder pain, to attend the caucus. He returned to the hospital almost immediately to undergo surgery.

Gephardt has been second-in-command in

the Democratic caucus since 1989. He told the caucus that "he should be held accountable" for the party's performance in the incoming Congress, according to one lawmaker, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Rose said he hoped the party "will now rather quickly let the American people know we've heard our message, that they want us to change."

A veteran of nine terms, Gephardt has traditionally enjoyed support in all wings of the caucus, and many lawmakers embraced his losing effort for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination.

Despite being an opponent of the North American Free Trade Agreement, he has been a loyal supporter of much of President Clinton's legislative program. And he spent months last year in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to enact the White House's plan for universal health care. Many Democrats blame Clinton for the magnitude of the party's election setbacks, however, and lawmakers are looking for a congressional strat-

Keaton: violence in movies gratuitous

WASHINGTON (AP) — Actor Michael Keaton accused the movie industry Wednesday of using gratuitous violence in films.

"Certain movies that are really, really violent and gratuitous, if they don't tell me anything I don't know... I don't need it," Keaton said during a speech at the National Press Club.

"If the point is a larger point — to teach me something — and I get a new take on it or it moves me in another way, not just for violence, but makes me see something, makes me see how ludicrous it is, it's a legitimate thing."

Keaton, who has starred in movies such as *Batman*, *Beetlejuice* and the upcoming *Speechless*, lamented that the abundance of movie violence is desensitizing people to the reality behind it.

"I want to still get mad when I read about people being shot — kids being shot by punks with guns for no reason. It drives me insane."

Still, he said Hollywood has become more attuned to the amount of violence in movies.

"I think they're more aware of it, but I'll bet you if they could make a ton of money and you made a violent movie, the movie'd get made," Keaton said.

Postage stamps scheduled to rise in price again

The price of a first-class stamp will go up early next year after nearly four years at 29 cents.

In the country's early years, postal charges were based on distance and applied to each piece of paper. Letters were simply folded and sealed.

Prices ranged from 25 cents per sheet for mail traveling more than 400 miles to between six cents and eight cents for under 40 miles.

A standard rate regardless of distance was established in 1863 at two cents per half-ounce. It rose to three cents in 1883.

Black Caucus could play swing vote role

WASHINGTON (AP) — Black lawmakers are promoting themselves as a crucial swing vote in the new Republican Congress, a warning to weakened Democrats to shore up their black support or lose it.

The Congressional Black Caucus soon will select a new chairman, hoping to build on its success as a voting bloc under current Chairman Kweisi Mfume, D-Md.

If Republicans stick together, they could pass legislation without any Democratic support. The GOP also is more likely to seek support from conservative white Democrats.

Still, the caucus' 36 Democratic members with full voting rights votes take on a different significance in a pretty evenly divided House of Representatives. Many of these usually loyal Democrats are frustrated, accusing their party of stiff-arming the concerns of blacks, then pinning blame for Democrats' resounding losses on low turnout by black voters and the creation of black congressional districts.

Stung by such scapegoating, black Democrats are prepared, if necessary, to rebel against their party

for the sake of their race, Mfume said in an interview.

"Don't blame blacks and Latinos for taking a loss at the polls," he said. "The situation that is before us presents us with enormous possibilities to negotiate, to bargain, but most of all, to win. There will be a lot of horse trading going on in the 104th Congress."

But there also could be setbacks. The new GOP leadership is discussing eliminating staff funding for the black caucus and other legislative service groups as a way to cut government spending.

Plus, caucus leadership is changing at a time when it is terribly reliant on Mfume's charisma and savvy. There are private worries that three often-mentioned potential successors, Reps. Donald Payne, D-N.J., Alcee Hastings, D-Fla., and Harold Ford, D-Tenn., are either too taciturn or too divisive to carry out Mfume's strategy.

Caucus tradition dictates that Mfume step down as chairman after one term, but nothing precludes him from being re-elected. Also, there could be a last-minute candidacy by Rep. Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, to put a smooth, experienced power broker at the Black Caucus helm.

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