

closing Friday 87.5 points higher than the week before. Moreover, after years of sleepy meetings with Ronald Reagan, the Congressmen could barely contain their enthusiasm for the more engaged Bush. Many seemed astonished that a President could think and talk extemporaneously. "He didn't need a prepared text," marveled Philadelphia Democrat Bill Gray.

But the Administration might have begun better if Bush or his chief of staff, John Sununu, had written a tighter script. A series of small but telling snafus sent the White House scrambling. The day after Bush telephoned a cheer to right-to-life advocates massed nearby on the Ellipse, the *New York Times* reported that Louis Sullivan, the nominee for Secretary of Health and Human Services, had privately told some Congressmen that he still believes in a woman's right to an abortion. Sullivan, who had sent mixed signals on abortion prior to his nomination in December, was summoned to Sununu's West Wing office, then hurriedly dispatched to reassure conservative Senators. The President, whose changing views on abortion have been hard to parse, tried to clear up the controversy by explaining, "He has supported my position 100%."

Events slipped further from Bush's control the next day, when his old friend Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady proposed paying for a \$90 billion bailout of bankrupt savings and loan institutions by slapping bank depositors with a 25¢ surcharge for every \$100 invested. It did not help matters that Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan had told lawmakers the day before that the country needed policies to encourage Americans to save. Fearing the wrath of passbook holders, most of Capitol Hill immediately lined up behind Republican Senator John Heinz's characterization of Brady's idea as "boneheaded." So did bankers and thrift operators, who predicted that new fees would drive depositors away.

Rather than jettisoning the plan, the White House curiously decided to defend it. Chief of Staff Sununu said the surcharge should be thought of as an insurance premium, not a tax. He refused to yield to suggestions that the Brady plan passed Budget Director Richard Darman's "duck" test for taxes. (Darman had told Congress that if a revenue plan "looks" or "quacks" like a tax, it is a tax.) Spokesman Marlin Fitzwater tried to calm things down by saying the surcharge was only a trial balloon. But Bush would not let the matter drop. Asked

if the surcharge would be a tax, the President replied, "Is it a tax when the person pays a fee to go to Yosemite Park?"

By week's end, with few outside the White House in favor of the idea, even Bush backed off, telling a Friday-morning press conference that "it's a little absurd to be commenting on a facet, a possible facet, of solving a problem when it hasn't even come to me." But one senior Administration official was less defensive about the flap. "Any fool could plainly see the general public wouldn't stand for it," he said.

Some Bush aides criticized Brady for not knowing when to keep quiet. The *Washington Post* reported that Brady had suggested the surcharge to the Reagan Administration last month, and was told then that it was a bad idea. Others tagged Sununu for putting Bush on a light, no-substance schedule in the crucial first week of his presidency—creating a news vacuum that Sullivan and Brady blundered into.



At a White House meeting, Democratic leaders present the President with some North Carolina hot sauce

The sauce, said Jim Wright, came from Texas "the way some Texans were born in Kennebunkport."

At times, it did appear that Bush lacked a coherent plan for governing beyond crusading for gauzy themes. The turmoil over Brady's proposal quickly overwhelmed the sketchy "theme" agenda worked up for the President by outgoing political operative Robert Teeter. Said a senior Administration official on Day 5: "If we have a 100-day plan, I haven't seen it." Added another: "This is what happens when you don't have a strategic thinker in the White House."

But it is also what happens when a new President takes office without an escape route from the fiscal cul-de-sac he has backed himself into. Candidate

Bush's no-new-taxes vow means he will not be able to keep promises to propose spending for new programs in education, child care and the war on drugs unless he breaks other promises to protect the defense budget and farm subsidies. Asked last week if his read-my-lips pledge would expire after one year, Bush replied meekly, "I'd like it to be a four-year pledge." But even he acknowledged that the kind of flap that followed the savings and loan mess may be repeated when he tells a joint session of Congress on Feb. 9 which promises he will keep and which ones he will abandon. "Look, I don't expect it's all going to be sweetness and harmony and light," the President said. "The minute we get those proposals up there on Feb. 9, I expect we're going to have other firestorms swirling around."

Bush's plan for the first weeks of his presidency is essentially a holding action. He has invited Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita to Washington this week for the first meeting with a foreign leader. Bush

will visit Korea and the People's Republic of China after attending the Feb. 24 funeral of Japan's Emperor Hirohito. Before then, the President will pop up to Canada on Feb. 10, the day after he delivers his budget speech on Capitol Hill. Explained a senior official: "We're getting out of town."

If that skimpy agenda lacks a certain grit, it has plenty of room built in for Bush to wrestle with budget proposals—as well as time to telephone friends, schedule last-minute lunches and swear in new staff members. If most of Bush's specific plans will not be unveiled for a few weeks, it is because Bush's aides have not yet figured them out. ■