



REBEL, WITH CAUSE

By RYAN SAGER

REP. Mike Pence (R-Ind.), who came to Congress six years after the 1994 Republican takeover, says he feels like a Minuteman who showed up late for the revolution.

But while he may have missed the Gingrich Revolution, the conservative stalwart has found a worthy fight nonetheless: He's battling his own party's leadership, which has abandoned the small-government principles that brought it to power. For months, Pence has led a band of House conservatives in rebellion against the fire-hose spending policies of President Bush and the Congress' leaders.

This week, as the budget process gets underway in earnest, the rebels face their moment of truth: The House will vote on their drive for a \$15 billion cut in spending to offset some of what's going to relief in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

It's a test of whether the GOP Congress is willing to get back to the work it was elected to do in 1994 — gutting government waste and shrinking the scope of the state — or is committed to prancing merrily on down the road to Big Government Conservatism.

"There's reason to be optimistic," Pence told me over lunch at the Capitol last Thursday. "But as a conservative, of course, I'm only cautiously optimistic."

Having lost two runs for the House in 1988 and 1990, Pence finally got to Washington, D.C., in 2001 — a moment when the possibilities for conservative Republicans seemed limitless.

President Reagan had been thwarted by a Democratic Congress; Newt Gingrich had been outmaneuvered by Bill Clinton. But now, with Congress and the White House under Republican control, conservative dreams of cutting government could finally come true.

Pence describes his feeling of the time: "Here I am, I'm finally all suited up. Gen. Washington, I'm here!"

But instead of the end of the Department of Education — a Republican goal since the Reagan years — the first piece of legislation he was handed was No Child Left Behind, the largest expansion of the federal government's role in education since the Carter years.

"They tell me: *Don't worry about it, it's an anomaly*," he recalls.

But after being re-elected in 2002, the next top-priority bill he got handed was the \$1.2 trillion Medicare prescription-drug giveaway.

"That's when I began to speak publicly about these matters," Pence recalled. "I don't try to be all holier-than-thou . . . But you want to create a new entitlement, you want the federal government to do national testing in my local school? Wrong answer. Not what I came here to do."

A few months after the Medicare vote, Pence gave the keynote address at the 2004 Conservative Political Action Conference, likening the conservative movement under President Bush to a ship that had veered wildly off course. Soon after, he was sent back to Washington for a third term, and was unanimously elected chairman of the Republican Study Committee (RSC), a group of more than 100 conservative House members.

Then came Katrina — and Bush's announcement of plans for a massive spending binge to make up for the federal government's meager initial response to the storm.

House conservatives flew into a rage — a release, really, of five years of pent-up anger.

Pence and the RSC quickly launched Operation Offset, aimed at cutting spending to make up for the cost of Katrina cleanup. More broadly, however, Pence and his crew jumpstarted a debate about the future of the Republican Party.

"I think 2006 will be the most difficult year for the Republican majority since it was minted in 1994," Pence told me last week. "If those who care most about a Republican majority perceive that we are walking away from our principles, then there could be a very disappointing outcome for many members of the House and Senate come Election Day."

What's more, he says: "I don't know what our rationale for retaining the presidency in 2008 is if we are what the Democrats will do minus 10 percent."

The GOP Congress is a long way from restoring any such rationale. This week's knock-down-drag-out House fight is over cutting roughly \$15 billion over the next five years — *one-tenth of 1 percent* of projected spending over that period. It's just the first muscle-movement of the first step toward offsetting what could end up being well over \$200 billion spent on Katrina.

By week's end, we should know whether House Republicans are capable of making even this feeble feint toward coming to their fiscal senses.

"I believe in picking my shots, picking my fights," Pence told me. And he's certainly picked a heck of a fight here.

What if Pence and his rebels lose? RSC members make up roughly half of the GOP majority. If they feel the party's scandal-weakened leadership is refusing to make a real course correction, they could back a serious challenge for leadership of the House early next year.

Given how far off-course the party has drifted, that could be exactly what's needed heading into 2006 and 2008.

Maybe Minuteman Pence got to Washington just in time.

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