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Rebuilding the GOP's House

By [Bill Steigerwald](#)
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Saturday, December 16, 2006

Hardly anyone beyond the D.C. Beltway has ever heard of the Republican Study Committee. But the group of more than 100 congressmen -- who are essentially the conservative conscience of the House of Representatives -- has an important (and increasingly tough) double mission: educating their less principled Republican siblings and trying to translate the conservative tenets of limited government, individual empowerment, a strong national defense and traditional values into legislation.

Needless to say, with the Bush administration spending like crazy and Democrats about to assume control of the House and Senate, there's lots of work ahead for newly elected study committee chairman Jeb Hensarling of Texas, a House member elected from the Dallas area in 2002.

Hensarling, 49, is a dedicated advocate for economic growth, job creation and tax relief who has distinguished himself by publicly challenging the White House and his party leadership on their bloated budgets and wanton spending. I talked to the former businessman and aide to Sen. Phil Gramm by phone Wednesday from his home near Dallas.

Q: Are you part of a dying breed of Republican conservatives or are you in the vanguard of a new Republican Revolution?

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cautiously optimistic that maybe there is some silver lining in this big gray cloud, and that is that the Republican Party can once again show the American people that we are committed to our core values and that we know how to translate those values into legislative proposals that are meaningful to them and their hopes and dreams and aspirations for their families.

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Q: Why did Republicans lose Congress?

A: Nobody can deny the power of the Iraqi conflict in that election. But it is not the only reason. Frankly, a very significant reason is that too many Americans came to the conclusion that the Republican Party lost its commitment to limited government, to accountability, to a balanced budget, to less spending. So that is where there is a huge battle. If you look at the polls, and I've looked at a number of polls, particularly in swing districts, the Republican brand has been damaged. Fiscal responsibility is one of our core values. Nobody expects the Democrats to be fiscally responsible. But if we're not fiscally responsible, I don't know how we ever get back into the majority.

Q: Did the Republicans deserve to be thumped?

A: I would put it to you this way. If I was a teacher, I might have given the Republicans a "B-minus," but I'd certainly give the Democrats an "F." Having said that, people expected us to get an "A" grade on fiscal responsibility and we didn't do it. The "Bridge to Nowhere" (in Alaska) happened on our watch. The increase on No Child Left Behind happened on our watch. The Medicare prescription drug benefit happened on our watch. The Democrats had an even more expensive prescription drug benefit program under Medicare that you rarely heard about. As a member of the budget committee, I know that almost without exception every amendment offered by the Democrats spends more money. But again, nobody expects them to be a fiscally responsible party, but they do expect (it of) us. ... the American voters rightly held our party responsible.

Q: How will you measure your success as chairman of the Republican Study Committee?

A: Right now, I am speaking to a lot of smart people I know in the conservative movement and really trying to find out the best way to organize the Republican Study Committee in the minority. It will be a different animal with different emphases. To some extent, our ultimate purpose is the same. But we know we can not advance the Republican movement until the Republican Party once again regains the majority -- not simply for the sake of having the majority, but for using the majority to further our conservative cause. We have to engage in more advocacy within our Republican conference. We have to help drive how the conference presents its legislative alternatives and how it frames its vision. The people did not lose faith with our principles. They lost faith with our ability and our commitment to our own principles.

Q: Do you have a sense that Republicans might be better at being out of power and on defense - at least better at upholding and defending and adhering to their core principles?

A: I think (losing Congress) was a cold slap on a cold face on a very cold morning that will hopefully wake up the conservative movement within the Republican conference within the House. Many of us have been talking for quite some time that the people are disappointed, particularly on spending. In my district -- which may not be a microcosm of America, but to some extent it's at least a microcosm of Texas -- although people were very concerned about the Iraq war, they didn't talk all that much about it. What they really talked about was that we're not convinced that you guys will control the border or will not control spending. That's pretty much what I've heard for the last two years.

I try to be an optimist, so I'm hopeful that as one door was slammed in our face, maybe another one will open and give us an opportunity to recommit ourselves to our core principles and our core values. Otherwise, if we don't regain the House in '08, we might be a minority a very, very long time. I hope my other colleagues come to that conclusion.

Bill Steigerwald is the Trib's associate editor. Call him at (412) 320-7983. E-mail him at: bsteigerwald@tribweb.com.

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