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Cover Story - Inside the RSC

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Even some of the staunchest Republicans admit that their party's ship seems off course, after a series of recent storms. But the conservative House Republican Study Committee believes it can steer the GOP back in the right direction.

Once thought of as a band of renegades, the Republican Study Committee -- which now counts more than 100 lawmakers as members -- has become the most visible and influential faction of the House Republican Conference. During the past month, the RSC persuaded House GOP leaders to seek deeper spending cuts to pay for hurricane-relief costs. And the group also may have played a role in denying Rep. **David Dreier**, R-Calif., from serving as acting House majority leader after Rep. **Tom DeLay**, R-Texas, stepped down, because RSC members doubted Dreier's conservative credentials.

Under the chairmanship of Rep. **Mike Pence**, R-Ind., a former talk-show host, the RSC has mounted an intense campaign to re-energize the party's conservative base. Whether the group can succeed, both in Congress and more broadly, remains to be seen, as Republican leaders in both chambers continue to struggle to move beyond their problems. But in recent interviews with nine members of the RSC and a staff member, it became clear that the group is aggressively seeking to fill what it sees as a leadership void in its party.

"There's a little bit of soul-searching going on, especially for Republicans in Congress," said Rep. **Bob Beauprez**, R-Colo., an RSC member. The war in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina, high gas prices, and the "little distractions" of legal problems for key Republicans on Capitol Hill and at the White House have left the majority party feeling demoralized, said Beauprez, who added, "There's a sense of being off balance." Another RSC member, who requested anonymity, complained that the House Republican leadership is "weak" and "doesn't have the power of ideas."

The RSC made a bold bid to supply some ideas on September 21, when it unveiled a \$500 billion spending-cut package aimed at compensating for Hurricane Katrina costs -- and at convincing conservative-base voters that Republicans in Washington are taking

their concerns seriously.

The group announced its "Operation Offset" campaign at a press conference outside the Capitol with much fanfare. Federal budget books were piled high on the podium, and members of anti-spending interest groups waved signs in the background. The RSC's 23-page packet of budget-cutting options included rescinding \$25 billion worth of "pork" projects in the recently enacted highway bill; delaying the new Medicare prescription drug benefit; and slashing funds for numerous longtime conservative targets, such as foreign aid, arts and humanities endowments, and Amtrak.

House Republican leaders tried to dismiss the effort. DeLay, for one, said that Republicans had already cut the fat from the budget. GOP leaders privately chewed Pence out, but RSC members nonetheless took to the airwaves, appearing on cable television and radio shows to stump for their budget cuts. "The conservatives around the country are frustrated with government spending," Rep. **Walter Jones**, R-N.C., an RSC member, said in an interview with *National Journal*. "The leadership early on should have told the administration that we are for smaller government."

Then DeLay's indictment on September 28 weakened House Republican leaders and further roiled the rank and file. Following a closed-door House Republican Conference meeting on October 6, the leadership said it would acquiesce to the conservatives' demands by seeking to increase entitlement cuts -- from \$35 billion to \$50 billion -- as part of this fall's budget reconciliation, impose across-the-board spending cuts, and rescind already-approved spending.

Conservatives might have declared victory, but subsequent developments showed they still have work to do. More-moderate House Republicans were resisting the additional spending cuts at press time, and even if the plan ultimately clears the House, it could die in the Senate, where GOP leaders are sticking to their original reconciliation savings target of \$35 billion.

Still, inside the Capitol, the message was clear: The RSC could no longer be dismissed. While the group -- which was founded in the 1970s and was known as the Conservative Action Team, or CATs, in the 1990s -- has enjoyed some victories over the years, GOP leaders often viewed the RSC's uncompromising true believers as pests that had to be controlled. Republican leaders even reportedly took to calling the RSC "the minority caucus," believing that their party would return to minority status if it were to follow the group's recommendations. The RSC was undeterred, however. Its membership rolls continued to grow, and its research apparatus likewise expanded to provide members with more ammunition to fight for conservative principles.

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Today, the RSC has five full-time staffers and an up-to-the-minute Web site (johnshadegg.house.gov/rsc). Members meet in a basement room in the Capitol at 1:15 p.m. each Wednesday that the House is in session. Lunch usually consists of sandwiches brought in from a nearby takeout restaurant. Pence leads the meeting, with reports from Rep. Joe Pitts, R-Pa., chairman of the Values Action Team of social conservatives, as well as from other members, who speak about particular legislative interests. "When we go into RSC meetings, we give each other courage," said Rep. **Marilyn Musgrave**, R-Colo.

In some cases, the RSC votes and adopts a group position on key issues. Its members said that debates are thorough, although one member said that "eccentrics" sometimes dominate the discussions and take starkly conservative policy positions that even the RSC rejects. "I can see how somebody would come to the conclusion that they're a bunch of renegades," the member said.

Rep. **Paul Ryan**, R-Wis., said that members have occasionally left the RSC when they didn't have the stomach to defy congressional leaders or President Bush. "We made it very clear what this organization was going to do," Ryan said. Jones added: "You've got to have someone who is willing to sit down with the president [and congressional leaders] and say, 'This is not the right thing to do.' "

Besides meeting on Wednesdays, the RSC sends out a daily e-mail to its members that analyzes legislation and its costs. When an unexpected issue comes to the House floor, the committee sends out an e-mail "action alert." Earlier this year, Pence appointed Rep. **Scott Garrett**, R-N.J., as the RSC whip to keep track of members' votes. Each Monday, the RSC sends an e-mail update to reporters and activists outlining upcoming legislation, as well as bills that RSC members have introduced.

The RSC has also formed a political action committee to support conservatives running for Congress. As of June 30, the House Conservative Fund had raised \$108,238 for the 2006 election cycle and had some \$87,000 on hand, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

RSC members say that Pence has been crucial in focusing the group on its goals and developing media strategies to gain national attention. "Full credit goes to **Mike Pence**," Beauprez said. "He really rallied the RSC."

With the prospect looming that House Republicans will hold new leadership elections in January, some insiders have suggested that Pence, or another RSC member, should seek a formal leadership post. RSC members seem divided on this issue; some said it is too early to make such decisions, given the uncertainty of DeLay's legal situation, while others said the RSC should assert itself as a powerful voting

bloc within the GOP Conference. "I would like to see someone from the RSC get into leadership," Jones said.

Beauprez noted that any House Republican who runs for a leadership slot will have to appeal to the group. "I think the RSC is a big enough player and a significant player," he said. Before a new House Appropriations Committee chairman was selected in January, the three contenders met with the RSC to discuss their views.

For now, RSC members said they are focusing on reducing federal spending. The question is whether they are trying to move the Republican Party too far to the right -- and whether fellow lawmakers will be willing to make deep cuts in politically sensitive entitlement programs, not to mention their own pork projects.

The Senate provided at least an initial answer to those questions on October 20, when it defeated attempts by conservative Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., to pare back earmarked spending -- including that for the much-maligned "Bridge to Nowhere" backed by Rep. **Don Young**, R-Alaska -- during debate on the fiscal 2006 Transportation-Treasury appropriations bill. Coburn, who as a House member headed the RSC's budget task force before his election to the Senate last year, argued that the money is needed for hurricane relief. But senior senators blasted him, saying they should determine how money is to be spent in their states.

Some RSC members insist that they will continue trying to push the House GOP Conference to the right, even if the more-moderate Senate rejects those policies. "We can't control the Senate," said Rep. **Chris Chocola**, R-Ind. Ryan added, "You never accomplish something unless you try. You can change the political dynamic quickly." And Musgrave contended, "Senate Republicans need to find their soul, too."

But Rep. **Jeb Hensarling**, R-Texas, suggested that a dose of pragmatism is also needed at the RSC, which, he said, must be cognizant of political realities. "At the end of the day, we didn't come here to make votes," Hensarling said. "We came here to make law." It remains to be seen whether the RSC can translate its newfound influence into legislation that actually becomes law.

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