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Medicare bill incites House conservatives

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For Rep. Mike Pence, the man who will lead the conservative House Republicans' official caucus in the next Congress, losing his fight last year against the Medicare bill was the legislative equivalent of the Alamo -- a gallant stand for the two dozen conservative opponents and one he hopes will become a rallying cry the next time.

"We were wiped out. There was nothing victorious about the Medicare bill. They won, we lost, that's how it works," Mr. Pence said of the Nov. 22, 2003, vote for which House Republican leaders needed three hours to corral enough Republican votes to pass the \$395 billion prescription-drug bill. In the end, 25 Republicans voted against it, while other Republicans swallowed their objections and agreed to help their leaders by voting for it.

"It wasn't just a defeat for the 25 at the Alamo; it was demoralizing for the [House Republican] Conference," Mr. Pence said.

But he said conservatives must learn from that loss, and he believes they have.

"Sometimes even in defeat, good things can come from people taking a principled stance," he said. "In the last year, I've seen colleagues come up and say, 'I'm with you next time.' I think this puts us in a very good position on Social Security reform, on a tax reform that represents no increase in taxes and on advancing the agenda of limited government and putting our house in order."

In a recent interview, the Indiana Republican, who takes over as chairman of the 100-strong conservative Republican Study Committee (RSC) next year, said he hopes that when his two years as chairman end, conservatives will have made a serious difference.

"I think it's time conservatives began to act like the majority of the majority," he said.

As a 29-year-old lawyer, he first ran for Congress in 1988 but lost. He ran and lost by a wider margin in 1990. He then put his political career on hold to run a think tank and later become a radio talk-show host.

From the platform of his show, syndicated across Indiana, he built name recognition, then ran for the House again in 2000 and cruised to an easy victory. Now he says he's like "the Frozen Man" because he brings the passion of a guy who was running as part of the early Newt Gingrich revolution of tax reform and shrinking the federal government.

"I'm like a minuteman who shows up 10 years late," he said. "I first ran for Congress before the revolution, and I arrived in Congress after it was over. But in that period of time, I never lost my belief in the principles -- the Reagan principles -- of limited government and traditional moral values that I ran on in the first place."

Mr. Pence said that as chairman, he doesn't plan to push particular issues of his own, but rather wants to make the RSC a platform for other members of Congress to push their issues, like giving Rep. Joe Pitts of Pennsylvania a platform to push abortion and fetal-pain legislation or Rep. Jeff Flake of Arizona a forum for pursuing a Social Security reform.

"Whenever people ask me at home what my agenda is, it's vote right and go home for dinner," Mr. Pence said. "I don't come at this job with a long laundry list of things that Mike Pence came to Congress to do, but rather I come at this job trying to form a record and a reputation as a thoughtful conservative that makes a conscientious effort to vote his conservative values, even if that means opposing members of my own party."

That he's done.

In addition to leading the opposition to the Medicare bill, he also voted against President Bush's No Child Left Behind education bill and was part of a group of RSC members who fought successfully to trim the size of spending bills in the past two Congresses.

Mr. Pence has managed to keep a solid relationship with House Republican leaders despite that history. He has remained a member of the whip operation even though he voted against those major initiatives.

But he gave up the whip team slot once he won the chairmanship of the RSC, citing the biblical verse that a man can't serve two masters.

As for the workings of the RSC, Mr. Pence plans social gatherings to try to create a broader network between House and Senate conservatives and with like-minded policy groups outside the Capitol. He hopes that networking will create "the kind of personal bond that when push comes to shove and handshake goes to arm break, they will have developed the kind of relationship with people who can say to them, 'Let me remind you again why you came here.' "

Another lesson he says he learned from the Medicare vote was the need "to show your mettle earlier in the process than at the day or time of the vote." To do that, he's thinking about making a sort of whip team to count the votes among RSC members, so that the next time a Medicare-type vote comes around, he can go to leaders and explain to them where conservative votes are.

Mr. Pence said the 109th Congress, with working majorities in the House and Senate and a Republican president who does not need to worry about running for re-election, has a gigantic opportunity. And he said the recent election is clearly a mandate for conservatives.

"My votes against the education bill and my votes against the Medicare bill got huge play at home. I guarantee you, for me it was a mandate for conservative leadership," he said. "To me, I look at it and I say, 'I'm out, I'm all the way -- I'm pro-life, I don't apologize for it.' My district knows what I stand for, and God bless them, and I give God the glory, 67 percent of my district said 'Keep doing it.' So look out."

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