



Minority Report

Congressional Republicans adjust to the age of Obama.

by **W. James Antle III**

AFTER THE DEMOCRATS TOOK CONTROL of both houses of Congress in 2006, some conservatives consoled themselves with this comforting thought: they might not have the majority anymore, but at least the Republicans who survived the bloodbath were, by and large, reliable conservatives. Especially in the House, where Republicans were safest in conservative districts and most vulnerable in the kinds of places that still send Nelson Rockefeller types to Washington. Therefore, the argument went, we would see a new, principled opposition in place of the way-losing, bridge-building, big-spending Republicans who lost the election.

A nice theory, but it didn't really work in practice. True, one could point to a filibuster here and a sustained veto there as an example of Republicans stopping popular but misguided legislation. And in the summer of 2008, the House GOP showed some spunk in the debate over offshore drilling, shouting "Drill, baby, drill!" at Speaker Nancy Pelosi as the nation's energy prices climbed. But more representative was the vote over a \$300 billion farm bill that increased subsidies and raised spending 44 percent over the previous year's levels.

Such extravagance was too much even for George W. Bush, who threatened to veto the bloated spending bill. John McCain, the GOP's 2008 presidential standard-bearer, also signaled his opposition. Yet 100 House Republicans abandoned the president and in effect voted to repeal one of the great successes of the Gingrich revolution: significant reductions in agriculture subsidies. All but 13 Republican senators did the same, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who inserted his own earmark in the bill for the benefit of horse farmers back in

Kentucky. Once again, fiscal conservatives were a rump within their own party.

Voters rewarded the Republicans for their generosity with taxpayer money by reducing their congressional numbers even further, knocking them all the way back to pre-1994 levels in both houses. (Which makes a certain amount of sense—if Republican members of Congress are going to behave as if 1994 never happened, then perhaps the rest of us should too.) And once again, conservatives outside Congress, in a triumph of hope over experience, are telling themselves, "At least the Republicans who are left are more likely to be conservatives."

This time they may just be right, at least as far as the House is concerned. True, House Minority Leader John Boehner crushed a conservative challenger to retain his position just as he did two years before, even though the number of seats lost under his watch is now over 50. Congressman Dan Lungren of California tried to use his experience as a founding member of the Conservative Opportunity Society as evidence he could lead the party out of the wilderness as Boehner's replacement.

Except that Lungren never gave any concrete examples of how his leadership or political strategy would differ from Boehner's, other than requesting a forum to talk about the party's future and disagreeing with the minority leader over a choice of slogan. (He was not a fan of "Change You Deserve.") At 94 percent, Boehner's lifetime American Conservative Union ratings were actually higher than Lungren's. Lungren even failed to differentiate himself from Boehner on questions that might have had an impact on the 2008 congressional elections: the bailout vote and the failure to adopt a national strategy.

There are some new faces leading House Republicans, however. Roy Blunt, who unlike Boehner supported the farm bill, was replaced as minority whip by Eric Cantor, a conservative from Virginia. Underneath Cantor, every member of the leadership team also belongs to the conservative Republican Study Committee (RSC). Mike Pence, the Indiana conservative who took on Boehner after the 2006 elections, was elected conference chairman. Thaddeus McCotter of Michigan was reelected policy chairman while Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington became conference vice chairman and John Carter of Texas was chosen conference secretary. Fellow Texan and RSC member Pete Sessions took over as head of the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC). All had Boehner's blessing, as RSC members are now a majority of the caucus.

Nevertheless, some old habits die hard. As one of their first official acts, Boehner and Cantor proposed a unilateral moratorium on earmark requests by all Republicans. In a written statement, Boehner said, "Our hope is that adoption of this resolution will be a first step in a much larger process of bringing meaningful change to the process by which Washington spends taxpayers' hard-earned money." But when the GOP caucus rejected the proposal for the second year in a row, *CQ Politics* quoted Boehner as saying, "I'm not sure the moratorium would have had that much impact."

In a sense, nothing the minority in the House does will have that much impact unless there is division within the ranks of the majority party. But as Republicans seek to find their way back from the wilderness, they could benefit from the increased exposure of conservatives like Pence. Over time, even more reform-minded conservatives like Paul Ryan of Wisconsin and Jeff Flake of Arizona could assume a higher profile in the way lowly minority Republicans like Newt Gingrich, Jack Kemp, and Vin Weber did before them.

THE PICTURE IS MURKIER IN THE SENATE, where the minority has more power. McConnell was reelected as minority leader without opposition. Jon Kyl of Arizona was reelected minority whip; Lamar Alexander of Tennessee won another term as conference chairman. The most significant change to the leadership team was John Cornyn of Texas taking over as chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee. But McConnell faces a challenge of a different kind.

Republicans barely cling to enough Senate seats to successfully mount filibusters without Democratic assistance. The most liberal Republicans will now hold the balance of power and will be unafraid to use it.

After all, the two moderate women from Maine—Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins—were easily reelected in 2006 and 2008, respectively. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania will be up for reelection in 2010, potentially facing MSNBC personality Chris Matthews. Specter is already the only Republican off the reservation on card check legislation, which would dramatically increase the power of labor unions. Even John McCain, his presidential hopes dashed, may settle back into maverick mode on questions like global warming and immigration policy. McConnell will have more soft votes than he can spare if Capitol Hill Republicans are going to have any hope of blocking or reshaping the Obama administration's agenda.

What congressional Republicans in both houses most conspicuously lack is a leader with the combination of political talent, procedural prowess, ideological principle, and raw ambition that helped power the last GOP revival in the 1980s and '90s. To be sure, there are Republicans on the Hill who possess some of these characteristics. But no individual or working team has yet brought these necessary elements together. Former House majority leader Tom DeLay once described Newt Gingrich as "the visionary," Dick Armey as "the policy wonk," and himself as "the ditch digger who makes it all happen." No such combination is currently in evidence. If that changes by 2010, conservative hopes really will have triumphed over recent experience. ❁

W. James Antle III is associate editor of *The American Spectator*.

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After Mumbai

Waiting for the second shoe to drop.

by David Aikman

INDIANS AS WELL AS FOREIGN OBSERVERS of all kinds were quick to call the November 26–29 massacres in Mumbai “India’s 9/11.” Mercifully for India, the 10 terrorists who took part in the attacks on 10 targets in Mumbai, including two luxury hotels, a train station, and a Jewish guest house, failed to murder the number of people they originally had in mind: 5,000. The September 11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon killed some 2,975 people.

But the Mumbai attacks were indeed India’s 9/11 in a different sense. Suddenly, Indians of all political parties realized their country was heart breakingly vulnerable to a squad of determined and well-trained terrorist thugs. Moreover, India was forced to consider what its foreign policy should be after unmistakable evidence emerged that it was in Pakistan that the plots against it had been hatched, planned, and guided. India was now a central target in al Qaeda’s overall jihad against the U.S. in particular and the West in general. Mumbai was not just India’s 9/11, but the world’s.

India’s vulnerability was evident at every stage of the attack. Even before the terrorists made landfall on Mumbai’s Indian Ocean coast, U.S. intelligence operatives had made clear to their Indian counterparts, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) responsible for foreign intelligence and counter-espionage, that NSA intercepts indicated a likely terrorist attack on Mumbai, originating in Karachi. Intelligence specifically identified the attackers as connected to Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Kashmiri terrorist group founded in the early 1990s. The Indian government acknowledged receipt of this information but neither its navy nor its coast guard was able to identify the terrorist vessel

that was sailing from Pakistani waters towards India. When the terrorists transferred from the Indian fishing boat they had hijacked to Zodiac high-speed dinghies for the final stage, they easily avoided Mumbai port security.

But it was when the attack was well under way in the Taj Mahal and Oberoi hotels that Indian unpreparedness revealed itself most fully. Once it was obvious that local police couldn’t handle the siege, India’s National Security Guard commandoes were summoned from their base outside Delhi. They deployed quickly enough to Delhi airport, but found no plane waiting to take them to Mumbai. It took another two and a half hours to locate a military transport. But once they arrived in Mumbai, their problems were not over; there were no trucks or buses waiting to get them into town and they had no maps of the hotels or adjacent areas. They had to wait another hour until Mumbai municipal transport buses could be rounded up to take them into the city. It was altogether nine hours before NSG commandoes got into action.

Once in action, the commandoes certainly fought bravely, but without any training or experience in hostage rescue. On hearing that a Jewish hostelry in Mumbai, the Chabad House, had been attacked, Israel immediately dispatched a group of its own commandoes to the city. While they waited in safe houses, Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak pleaded with his Indian counterpart to allow them at least to rescue the Chabad House hostages, all of whom were Jewish. The Indians refused. “It was purely a matter of pride,” explained a senior Indian journalist. Eventually, the NSG commandos rappelled from a helicopter onto the Chabad House roof