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Conservatives' competing agendas threaten their hold on power

By Steven Thomma
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WASHINGTON - They're spending money faster than any U.S. government in memory. They expanded the federal reach into education and hired more bureaucrats. They've expanded a big-government entitlement program more than anyone since LBJ in the mid-'60s.

Liberals run amok? Hardly. It's the "conservatives" who control the government. And that has some traditional conservatives worried, at the very moment when they enjoy a peak of power that movement founder Barry Goldwater could only dream about.

Conservatives now are under the twin burdens of governing and holding onto power. The pressure on them has deepened fissures within the conservative movement, pitting fiscal hawks against "big government" Republicans and social conservatives against business groups.

President Bush has managed to hold the coalition together. But as he nears lame-duck status and conservatives start thinking about the post-Bush era, the rising tensions within their ranks are forcing them to rethink their agenda. At stake is whether they build an enduring majority or slip into decline and lose power.

"This is a clearly important moment of decision," said Newt Gingrich, the former Republican House Speaker. "Inevitably in the second term of a president there are tremendous cross-pressures about where the party and the movement go."

In 1964, after Goldwater's landslide defeat, conservatives were flat on their backs, a minority within the Republican minority party. Then they organized for decades, gained great strength during Ronald Reagan's presidency, took control of the House in 1994 for the first time in 40 years, and have controlled Congress, the White House, the Supreme Court and most governors' mansions since George W. Bush came to power. Yet now their movement is troubled.

"There is a half life to political movements," said Ross Baker, a political scientist at Rutgers University in New Jersey. "They consolidate, they begin to decompose. Then they reconstitute themselves, usually with different personalities and different issues. ... They have to fall apart before you can reconstitute them."

Among the key decisions facing conservatives is whether they will use the rest of Bush's second term to roll back some hallmarks of his first. Proud as he was of his efforts to improve education and help the elderly pay for prescription drugs, those expansive federal programs angered some conservatives, who now want to cut them back.

"The conservative movement is at a crossroads," said Rep. Mike Pence, R-Ind., chairman of the House Republican Study Committee, the largest group of conservatives in Congress. "As the Republican Party did 40 years ago, as actor Ronald Reagan said 40 years ago, we've come to another time for choosing: Whether we're committed to the ideals of limited government, fiscal discipline and traditional moral values, or whether we will continue to sacrifice those principles on the altar of preserving our governing majority."

To Pence and many like him, the movement went astray when it started using the federal purse to buy votes. Too many conservatives started to believe that "big government is good government if it's our government," Pence said.

Federal spending has soared since conservatives took over the Senate, House and White House in 2000, the first time they had controlled all three since 1954. Together they have presided over the biggest increase in federal spending since Lyndon B. Johnson, a liberal Democrat, was president. And it's not just for national security post-Sept. 11.

Their spending on routine government operations - beyond national security and mandatory programs like Social Security - has risen at an inflation-adjusted rate of 4.8 percent a year, the fastest since Richard Nixon was president from 1969-74, according to the Cato Institute, a conservative-libertarian think tank.

"Big government Republicanism" has replaced the limited government ideals that Goldwater espoused in 1964. Bush presided over the dramatic expansion of the U.S. Department of Education to oversee his No Child Left Behind law. He

and Congress expanded Johnson's Medicare program to cover soaring prescription drug costs. Subsidies to farms soared under Republican rule too, as have annual federal budget deficits.

Pence proposes rescinding part of the Medicare prescription drug benefit, rolling back federal education standards, and amending the Constitution to require the budget to be balanced. He also will push to amend the McCain-Feingold law that outlawed unregulated money in politics. Pence says it restricts free speech.

Gingrich thinks conservatives need to fight less among themselves, produce more, admit mistakes and move on.

"People have only one question for a governing majority: Are you delivering?" Gingrich said at a conference sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank.

"They don't want to hear about ideology. They don't want to hear about Senate rules. ... If you are in the minority, you should fight. If you are in the majority, you should deliver."

Today's conservative Republican majority is split over competing values, Baker said, which renders it "in some ways unstable."

Economic conservatives, including such groups as the Chamber of Commerce and National Association of Manufacturers, have a far different agenda than do social conservatives such as the Christian Coalition or Focus on the Family.

Business groups want changes in bankruptcy laws, an energy bill and more spending on highways. They see congressional fights over the social conservatives' agenda - banning flag burning, intervening in the Terri Schiavo case or banning gay marriage - as distractions.

For their part, social conservatives felt betrayed after recent moves in Congress to compromise on federal judges and to allow federal financing of medical research using stem cells from human embryos.

"We share the disappointment, outrage and sense of abandonment felt by millions of conservative Americans who helped put Republicans in power last November," said James Dobson, an influential social conservative.

More importantly, the rival agendas result in differing approaches to governing. Those who want tax cuts or a highway bill negotiate and compromise, and are happy to get a portion of what they want. But those who want to ban gay marriage or get anti-abortion judges approved do not want to bargain.

"You can dicker over money," said Baker. "You can't dicker over values."

For more on Gingrich, go to www.newt.org.

For more on the Republican Study Committee, go to <http://johnshadegg.house.gov/rsc/index.htm>.