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## Thumbing Nervously Through the Conservative Rulebook

By [ROBIN TONER](#)

IN a simpler time, before they controlled the House, the Senate and the White House, conservatives knew what they believed about the federal government. It was too big, too bloated, too prone to throw money at problems in foolhardy efforts at social engineering. It was almost always wiser to trust the states and local governments - or better yet, individual initiative and local charities.

After five years in power, though, conservatives have found those first principles challenged, again and again, by the messy realities of governing. They hoped to limit government's role in Medicare; they ended up with a vast expansion of the entitlement. They hoped to pare back federal spending; they ended up with rising spending and substantial deficits. Their vision of an "ownership society," with individuals taking more responsibility (and risk) for their retirement and health savings, has proved a hard sell with the American public.

Now conservative beliefs about the proper size and role of the federal government - the limits of compassionate conservatism - are facing, perhaps, their greatest domestic test. What is the appropriate conservative response to Hurricane Katrina and the devastation it left? What role should the federal government play in the rebuilding of New Orleans? Simply rely on the magic of the private market, encouraged by big tax breaks and regulatory relief, or try to social-engineer a safer, more equitable city?

And what lessons should conservatives draw about the performance of government, at all levels, in disaster relief?

Newt Gingrich, the former speaker of the House and a principal architect of the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress, argues that this is nothing less than a transformational moment in American politics that demands a new conservative response. "I think the challenge to Republicans now is you have the House, you have the Senate, you have the White House, you had better so thoroughly reform this government that people believe you can deliver," he said.

It is hardly a theoretical debate. So far, Congress has approved more than \$60 billion to deal with Katrina, and spending is expected to quickly surpass \$100 billion. Conservatives are already making decisions on Capitol Hill and in the White House, very quickly, and under fire from the Democrats. For many, it is painful. Leading fiscal conservatives acknowledge that the federal government will - and should - spend generously on disaster relief, but argue that President Bush and Congress should find some of that money elsewhere in the federal budget.

The conservative Heritage Foundation suggested that members of Congress should return some of the billions earmarked for special projects in the recent highway bill and use that money in New Orleans. More practically, Representative Mike Pence, chairman of the Republican Study Committee, an influential group of 100 conservative House members, suggested conservatives will increasingly resist

the White House and their party leadership if they fail to cut the budget elsewhere to cover the new Katrina costs.

"I was very troubled that the administration sent a request for more than \$50 billion to the Hill without so much as a recommended cut," he said.

Conservatives are also debating, among themselves, the implications of what is widely seen as a faltering, confused and slow governmental response to Katrina.

Some, notably the libertarian Cato Institute, argue that the bureaucratic failures only reflect the need to reduce the size of the federal government. Chris Edwards, a Cato analyst, compares the federal government to "a fat, bloated conglomeration that should shed other functions that divert it from the core functions" - like some specific forms of disaster relief.

Grover Norquist, a leading advocate of substantially reducing the federal government, argued that the disaster only underlined the need for more tax cuts to spur the economy. "Step one is you deal with the problem - rebuild New Orleans," he said, "and step two, you enact economic policies so you can afford to rebuild New Orleans."

But Representative Jeff Flake, an Arizona Republican and a staunch believer in limited federal government, worried that the post-Katrina reaction shows "people have a more expansive view about what the role of the federal government is or ought to be than is warranted by the Constitution or the principles of good governance."

Still, many conservatives themselves no longer share the traditional belief in reining in the federal government wherever possible - most notably, in recent years, championing a far more interventionist foreign policy in Iraq and beyond. And for those committed to the idea of a strong executive, particularly on domestic security, the response to Katrina was troubling. The focus, they say, should be less on the size of the government than on how it performed.

William Kristol, the editor of *The Weekly Standard*, the conservative magazine, said there clearly needed to be more "energy in the executive," as Alexander Hamilton would put it, in the first days after the hurricane. "Personally, I don't have a problem saying maybe conservatives should favor more spending in some areas of security, disaster relief," he said. "That's a pretty core function of government from a conservative standpoint. This isn't Great Society, New Age, government feel-good kind of stuff."

Some conservatives are debating how to create, if not a Great Society in New Orleans, at least a renewed and perhaps more prosperous one. Representative Flake said the recovery efforts can showcase conservative ideas like vouchers for education and health care, and new efforts to encourage home ownership. Mr. Gingrich, in a memo circulated last week, called for the creation of a "Zone of Recovery, Reconstruction and Prosperity" with huge tax breaks to encourage investment and jobs - overseen by an "entrepreneurial public manager" with the power to coordinate all federal activities.

Inevitably, all this discussion could challenge the status quo. John DiIulio, who initially led the Bush administration's faith-based initiative, argues, "The bigger government has gotten, the less we've thought through effective public administration."

Two trends that should be examined, he said: "government by proxy," shifting administrative

responsibilities for an array of federal programs to state and local governments and private entities; and the role Congress plays in defining, and endlessly redefining, what agencies should do. (Both are politically difficult for a Republican Congress, which has supported both trends, to confront.)

Whatever emerges, of course, will look less like an ideology and more like a compromise fashioned to meet a vast and immediate need. Conservatives have already learned that lesson with the Medicare prescription drug bill and with a budget strained by a costly war.

Franklin Roosevelt, the great pragmatist and architect of much of the federal government, knew it well. Asked how he would explain the political philosophy behind the Tennessee Valley Authority, he replied, "I'll tell them its neither fish nor fowl," he said. "But whatever it is, it will taste awfully good to the people of the Tennessee Valley."

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