



Boehner v. the Freshmen: Debt Ceiling Battle Lines Are Drawn

Quite a different feeling from the day when 87 Republicans were sworn in as Congressmen for the first time in 2011 and John Boehner rejoiced to welcome this freshman class of colleagues. On that heady day Boehner rightly reckoned that he would soon be handed the Speaker's gavel and, with it, control of the House of Representatives and of the policy agenda of the Congress specifically and the federal government generally.



The debt "crisis" has Speaker Boehner wondering if the troops have received the marching orders, however. John Boehner is an old-school, wheeler dealer who knows just how much grease to put on the skids. These Tea Party-backed recruits, however, are a dogmatic corps who are committed to sticking to their guns at all costs. Not exactly the sort of esprit de corps Boehner advocates.

As one [article](#) summed up the situation: "Mr. Boehner is struggling like few recent Speakers before him to reconcile his own deal-making Republicanism with the no-compromise determination of his Class of 2010. His own leadership may be at stake."

Similar dispatches are being published throughout Tea Party nation.

"A go-along, get-along Republican" who "doesn't have stomach for a fight." Those were the words used by Tea Party Nation founder Judson Phillips to describe Speaker of the House John Boehner after Boehner cut a deal with Democrats earlier in the year to keep the federal government funded.

That demonstration of Boehner's pliability on principle so outraged much of the Tea Party coalition that reports from the various Tea Party outposts suggest that the movement will back a challenger to Boehner in the 2012 elections.

Witness the following comment from Michael Snyder of the American Dream, who insisted that if the Tea Party is to retain its credibility and maintain its political potency, then "they must hold John Boehner accountable and go after his seat during the next primary season."

Mark Meckler of the Tea Party Patriots put it this [way](#): "If John Boehner really thinks there's no daylight between him and the Tea Party, he's not looking."

While Speaker Boehner may not take seriously the threat of a Tea Party-supported attempt to wrest his district from him (and thus his power), some pundits propose that the racket of rebellion will weaken



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Boehner immediately and will discourage Democrats from being so eager to compromise, as they will sense his vulnerability and prey upon it.

Now's as good a time as any for the members on the other side of the aisle to test both the mettle of Boehner's old-line faction of Republicans and the tensile strength of the cords binding that segment of the party to the younger (typically) and more rigid Tea Party element of the GOP.

Recently, Speaker Boehner has been thwarted time and again by this bloc of fiscal conservatives in his attempts to shepherd through the House a bill permitting elevation of the ceiling placed on the amount the federal government is permitted to borrow (currently set at \$14.3 trillion).

Given the fact that some action must be taken by August 2 or the government will default on its "debt," and with the threat that appropriate agencies will reduce the nation's credit rating, Speaker Boehner is under the gun to push his people to toe the party line.

There is little doubt that if push comes to shove, however, Boehner will push the entire bulk of the blame onto the backs of the freshman foils.

A considerable coterie of the new Congressmen have adamantly insisted that they will never assent to an increase in the debt ceiling. Still others have predicated their support on prior passage of spending cuts or this or that version of a balanced budget amendment.

When word percolated up that Speaker Boehner was negotiating with the White House to present a package to reduce spending that included a \$1 trillion tax increase, the freshmen stood firm and the Speaker had to cease the parley and trot back reluctantly to his own (unfamiliar) battle line.

A former Republican colleague of Boehner's [explained](#) the relationship thus: "The freshmen know why they were sent [to Congress] and they know full well they were not sent there to raise taxes. They were sent there to cut spending and restrain the growth of government."

Time is running out for Speaker Boehner to rally the troops and assemble the 218-member force necessary to pass a ceiling-raising bill through the House of Representatives. Under other circumstances, the Speaker may have been able to count on a number of Democrats siding with him in any measure that increases the ability of the federal government to economically enslave the middle class, but given that any Republican-sponsored bill is likely to include some cuts in the size of the government, their alliance is doubtful.

By all accounts, the freshman representatives are willing to withstand an electorate backlash. Their two-year terms will soon expire, and they'll be back at the mercy of voters who may view their reticence as "gridlock," a term by now associated by many voters with bad governance.

In the crucial days to come, a few question remain for those who self-identify as Tea Party Congressmen: Can they tell the difference between soldiers and actors? Will the Tea Party be co-opted by the proffer of power to those lawmakers anxious to bolster their own political clout? If the Tea Party abdicates its seat of power, where will disaffected voters turn and what movement will fill the vacuum?

And most importantly, will there ever be a majority of Congressmen committed to never compromise on issues of constitutional fidelity?

If these lately minted lawmakers stick to their principles, the principles for which they were elected in the first place, perhaps then we've found the antidote to Potomac Fever in a little bit of Tea.

Photo of Speaker of the House John Boehner: AP Images



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