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House GOP has little to show while forcing one crisis after another

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There was so much more they wanted to do.

Three years ago, Republicans retook the House with a fire-eating confidence and an ambitious plan to remake the U.S. government. They wanted to cut spending, of course. They wanted to get rid of the health-care law they deride as “Obamacare.”

But that was not supposed to be the list. That was supposed to be the start.

The House GOP also wanted to take away funding for PBS. And Planned Parenthood. They wanted to change the future of Medicare. They voted to roll back EPA regulation of greenhouse gases. And of mountaintop-removal mining. And of the Chesapeake Bay.

Now, after forcing four national crises, the House GOP can count one major victory. One major defeat. And a large number of opportunities lost.

Government spending was cut. That was the victory. But the Affordable Care Act — the president’s signature health-care law — lives. And many of the GOP’s specific ideas for paring down government and eliminating liberal priorities were neglected as the House threw itself into all-consuming showdowns.

Today, from the conservatives’ own perspective, so many changes are still unmade.

And the one tactic that worked doesn’t work anymore.

“You changed the conversation the first time” the House Republicans threatened a government shutdown, said Michael Tanner, of the libertarian Cato Institute.

But, he said, Republicans never moved beyond their crisis strategy, to the more nuanced task of wresting individual changes in law. “They didn’t seem to have an Act Two,” Tanner said. “And not having an Act Two means you go back and do this again.”

The arc of the current Republican era in the House can be traced through its four great crises. In the first, they learned. In the second, they won. In the third, they struggled. In the fourth, they were whopped.

The first showdown was in April 2011, just months after they took over. Republicans threatened to force a government shutdown if Democrats didn't agree to budget cuts. Just minutes before the deadline, they did.

But, later, new Republicans would feel misled: many of the \$38 billion in "cuts" were Washington illusions, designed to change little in the real world.

The second showdown came in the summer of 2011, when Republicans threatened not to raise the national debt ceiling. This time, the GOP and President Barack Obama agreed to set caps on annual spending and to set in motion a bigger, broader budget cut: sequestration. This was a massive cut — \$85 billion in the first year — spread across much of the federal government.

It was designed to be so bad that it wouldn't come true: the two parties would be scared into agreeing on a less-painful alternative.

Then they didn't. And it did come true. Now, to House Republicans looking backward, sequestration — designed more like a booby trap than a real-world policy — looks like one of their signature achievements.

Thanks to those cuts, and others imposed since the Republican takeover, federal spending in fiscal 2013 was projected to be about 5 percent lower than in 2010 (accounting for inflation).

When the House GOP created a PowerPoint presentation titled "What We've Achieved," these sequester-driven reductions in spending were trumpeted in the first slide. "For the first time since the Korean War, total federal spending has gone down for two years in a row," the party declares, meaning fiscal 2012 and 2013. The spending cuts were also on the second slide. And the third. There were five slides total. (The other two focused on tax increases that might have happened, but did not.)

"It forced the spending curve downward," Colorado Republican Rep. Cory Gardner said. "It actually made government and Washington, D.C., finally deal with what the American people have been dealing with, and that's having to deal with less income and revenue."

At this point, there was clear logic behind House Speaker John Boehner's strategy of governing through crisis. At these pressure points, he could command the attention of a Democratic president and Senate that might otherwise have ignored the House's demands.

"House Republicans have kept their promises to the American people, and used every tool available to advance the American people's priorities in a town still run by Democrats," Michael Steel, a spokesman for Boehner, an Ohio Republican, said in an emailed statement.

But, even when it worked at its best, there was already a clear downside. The deals that ended the crises were crafted in haste and under immense pressure. There was no time for detailed, program-by-program decisions — cut this, not that.

Instead, sequestration made its cuts across the board, hitting agencies around the federal government. When its cuts hit, about 57,000 children were denied services from Head Start. FBI agents could not pay for gas in their cars. And government-funded science research was significantly cut back.

And, from the Republican perspective, sequestration did little to settle an important question: In a time of massive debt, what programs do not deserve funding at all?

The House had already made its list of what needed to go. In a marathon debate over spending in the early months of 2011, legislators had voted to eliminate all funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

But sequestration didn't do that. It reportedly cut the agency's funding, resulting in staff layoffs and furloughs.

The House had also voted previously to eliminate federal funding for family planning grants. But sequestration did not do that, either. It just eliminated \$14.9 million in funding, according to estimates from the National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association.

"Sequestration might have been viewed as a success. But see, I'm one of those people who believe that we ought to do our jobs," said former Montana Republican representative Denny Rehberg, who left his House seat last year in an unsuccessful bid for the Senate.

Congress's job, Rehberg said, is to sort out good money and bad money and only cut the latter. Sequestration didn't do that, he said. With an across-the-board cut, "you hurt the agencies that are very efficient, very effective and watching their pennies," Rehberg said.

In fact, Rehberg said, the cuts might tend to encourage waste: Bloated agencies found it easier to absorb the sequester cuts.

"The bigger agencies," he said, "are laughing all the way to doing what they did last year."

The third showdown came in late 2012, over the so-called fiscal cliff. The disadvantages were more obvious now. The GOP was playing defense and giving up points. When the deal was over, Republicans had actually given some ground to Obama, allowing tax rates to rise for high-earning households. In return, they kept rates low for everybody else.

The deal included no significant budget cuts.

And, as the House bounced from showdown to showdown, there was little time or attention for other priorities. The House had endorsed ambitious plans from Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, from Wisconsin, to change Medicare for future seniors, but those gained little traction with Democrats.

Ohio Republican Rep. Bill Johnson had his own goal: He wanted the House to pressure Obama to ease off the coal industry — rolling back EPA regulation of greenhouse gases, coal mining and coal-ash disposal.

But, as Congress has slipped into white-knuckle showdowns, Johnson's efforts have rarely gained the spotlight.

“Sun Tzu said, ‘Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat,’ ” Johnson said. He believes Obama and the Democratic Senate are still the main obstacles to his work. But the House's crises have made it hard to focus on anything else. “The kind of mule-headed, dig-in-your-heels-at-all-cost thinking and political theater that we see going on in Washington — that's not what our founders intended,” Johnson said.

In the fourth showdown, the crisis strategy stopped working.

Last week, a 16-day government shutdown — triggered by the GOP's refusal to fund the government without hobbling the Affordable Care Act — ended with the GOP hobbled and the health-care law moving ahead. Democrats refused to budge, and Republicans were pressured into a deal by the upcoming deadline to raise the debt ceiling.

For House Republicans, it was a lesson learned — at last — the hard way.

“Harry Reid is the gatekeeper of the American public right now. And if you can't get past him . . . it's not going to happen,” Gardner, the Colorado Republican, said of the Senate majority leader. “You can charge the hill, time after time. (But) when you're dropping off the battlefield, you've got to figure out a different tactic.”

Now, House Republicans in Congress are looking for a different way. They have begun formal budget talks with Senate Democrats, hoping to iron out the kind of detailed, long-term spending plan that the showdowns never produced.

But one major question remains. If the Affordable Care Act survives, will the House GOP ever be able to focus effectively on anything else? Kevin Hassett, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, said he worries that Republican disdain for the new health-care law will draw the party back into other distracting and hard-to-win fights.

“Say you're in a marriage, and one of the spouses had been unfaithful. Then the first thing you talked about every day of your lives was that act. Then how is that marriage going to go?” Hassett said. In this analogy, of course, the spouses are the two political parties. And the affair is the health-care law, an offense — for Republicans — that won't go away.

“We're doomed to fight about this for a long time,” Hassett said. “And my guess is that until we're done fighting about it, that there's not going to be a lot of other stuff.”