

The Washington Post

The GOP's counterinsurgency by spenders

By Marc A. Thiessen
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The Republican establishment in Washington is bracing itself for an influx of fiscally conservative insurgents this fall, as Tea Party candidates from Utah, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Wisconsin, Nevada and other states have either secured their party's Senate nominations or are running strong. Bemoaning the earthquake their arrival on Capitol Hill portends, former Senate majority leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) told The Post this past weekend, "We don't need a lot of Jim DeMint disciples" in the Senate, adding "as soon as they get here, we need to co-opt them."

Jim DeMint can rest easy. It is unlikely that folks like Mike Lee, Ron Johnson or Sharron Angle will be co-opted if they win. But come November there may be some new Republican senators eager to join the club. While the media has focused on the rise of the Tea Party movement and the success of conservative insurgents in GOP primaries, there is another smaller insurgency taking place under the radar screen -- a quiet insurgency of more moderate Republicans for whom fiscal discipline is not a top priority.

With the departure of Sen. Arlen Specter to the Democratic Party, it seemed as if Republican moderates were a dying breed. All that was left of the troika that put President Obama's \$787 billion stimulus over the top

were the women from Maine -- Sen. Susan Collins and Sen. Olympia Snowe. But then Sen. Scott Brown arrived in January, and he has hewed a centrist course -- recently joining Collins and Snowe in providing the GOP votes needed to pass both President Obama's big spending "jobs" bill (a.k.a. "son of stimulus") and his financial regulation bill filled with budget gimmicks that will eventually add more than \$5 billion to the deficit. Judging from the comments on Brown's Facebook page, many Tea Party activists believe they were duped. But the Republican senator from Massachusetts is simply voting like, well, a Massachusetts Republican.

Others may soon join the big-spending ranks. In Delaware, one of the most liberal Republicans in the House, Rep. Mike Castle, is the favorite to become the state's next senator. And in Illinois, moderate Republican

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Rep. Mark Kirk holds a narrow lead in the Illinois Senate race for Obama's seat. Both have weak records on fiscal issues. Castle rates a lowly "C" from the National Taxpayers Union, while Kirk gets a slightly better "C+" rating.

In North Dakota, Republican Gov. John Hoeven has a huge lead over his Democratic opponent and will almost certainly be elected to replace retiring Sen. Byron Dorgan. Hoeven is a solid conservative on many issues, and he would certainly be an improvement over Dorgan. But he is a big spender. According to the Cato Institute, he has raised per capita spending by almost 7 percent annually since 2003. In just two legislative sessions beginning in 2007, Hoeven presided over a whopping 60 percent increase in spending. Last year, North Dakota Democrats even launched ads declaring Hoeven the "biggest spender in North Dakota history." While he is not a deficit spender, he is not, suffice it to say, a spending hawk in the Tea Party mold.

Then there is Rep. Roy Blunt, who is running slightly ahead Secretary of State Robin Carnahan in Missouri. Like Hoeven, Blunt is a conservative on many fronts -- but spending is not one of them. Blunt has been a prolific earmarker during his 12 years in Congress. In 2010 alone, he has requested \$153 million in earmarks -- prompting Carnahan to swear off all earmarks in a bid to get to the right of Blunt on fiscal issues. Carnahan campaigns as if she were the Tea Party candidate, accusing Blunt of having "become famous for

his pork-barrel spending" and calling him a "prodigious porkmeister." Earlier this month, Blunt responded with an ad promising he would vote as a fiscal conservative in the Senate: "Irresponsible spending and crippling debt are killing jobs today and our children's future tomorrow. That's wrong and I'll fight to change it."

Blunt is not alone in trying to regain ground on fiscal discipline. In the current environment, even GOP moderates are tacking to the right on fiscal issues -- at least rhetorically. Kirk recently warned that Illinois is rapidly falling into the same financial situation as Greece (his opponent is, conveniently, of Greek descent) and declared that "Spending is not the way to go." Even Castle's campaign Web site warns, "The federal debt continues to grow out of control and threatens American financial stability and economic growth." Of course, how they vote once elected is a different story.

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In this year's election, the driving force behind the conservative insurgency is a demand for fiscal responsibility. So it is ironic that the GOP revolution of 2010 may well sweep some big-spending Republicans into the Senate. If several Tea Party candidates stumble and fall, there is even a chance the big spenders could even make up a majority of the new Republican senators. That would undoubtedly bring a smile to Trent Lott's face.

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