



## **With strong momentum on slashing deficit, strife looms in GOP**

By Erik Wasson - 01/02/11 05:26 PM ET

The new year will be a pivotal one when it comes to government spending, and experts said in interviews with The Hill that they see the budget fight starting within the Republican Party over the next few months.

The GOP has to decide whether to try to forge a bipartisan deficit-cutting deal with the president or take a stand on deep spending cuts and wait until a possible GOP president in 2013 to enact changes.

“Momentum for deficit-cutting hasn’t been this great in many years,” said Bob Bixby, executive director of the Concord Coalition, which advocates tackling the national debt.

He said that the effort by Sens. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.) and Mark Warner (D-Va.) to forge a bipartisan Senate bill based on the president’s debt commission recommendations offers real hope of a budget deal, but “the House could be a stumbling block in the negotiations.”

House Republicans refused to back the debt commission report, while Sens. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) and Mike Crapo (R-Idaho) voted for it even though they objected to many of its aspects in the interest of seeking a bipartisan solution.

“They just won the majority and feel they need to make a statement,” Bixby said of the House Republicans.

On the other hand, he said, “The public seemed to respond well to the lame-duck work; it wants results. Maybe the lame-duck session shows them that this might be a political winner.”

“It will be an interesting battle within the Republican party ... Republican leadership will be in a bind,” Tad DeHaven of the libertarian Cato Institute said.

GOP leaders will have to please Tea Party-backed freshmen members while trying to get spending cuts that can make it past Obama’s signature. He noted that the Tea Party largely opposed making the tax-cut compromise with Obama since it included spending increases on unemployment insurance.

“A lot of the fresh blood would have pushed against going along with that tax deal,” DeHaven said. He said new members want a real debate on big cuts like whether to eliminate the departments of Education and Transportation.

“I still sense that the old guard does not want to have that conversation,” he said, noting that old Washington hands believe cutting popular programs is just not worth the political risk.

DeHaven said a "60 Minutes" interview where Boehner only talked about small cuts in the legislative branch's budget were a bad sign. Another bad sign has been the appointment of Rep. Hal Rogers (R-Ky.), known as a longtime pork-barrel spender, to head the House Appropriations Committee, he said.

National Taxpayers Union Director of Government Affairs Andrew Moylan said that spending cuts will remain at the top of the agenda for the GOP and that the need to raise the nation's debt ceiling — likely in the spring — provides the flashpoint for the internal Republican battles.

This fight is necessary because many freshmen have no intention at all of raising the debt limit, he said, while leadership believes not doing so is damaging to the economy.

Moylan said the spending fight will come down to who can claim credit for any deficit plan. Obama will attempt to position his Feb. 14 budget proposal in order to claim credit, he predicted.

Winslow Wheeler, a former defense appropriations aide and author, said that the most important decisions will come within the Republican conference.

“The question will be whether Republicans try to show that they are able to govern or if they are going to continue playing games. The budget mark will be the test of that,” he said, referring to the budget proposal by incoming Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wis.).

Democrat Stan Collender, a blogger for Capital Gains and Games and a former Budget Committee staffer, predicted that there would be no deficit compromise in the coming year and that the GOP will opt for confrontation.

But he said that Obama will not have to accept deep cuts to spending that he has opposed.

He said there could be multiple shutdowns when the continuing resolution expires in March and when the fiscal year ends in September but that the dynamics of this resemble 1995, when President Clinton was able to pin the blame on Republicans.

Because of this, Obama simply has to hold firm against cuts he does not himself back and he would win.

“The key words for 2011 are gridlock, stalemate and shutdown,” he predicted.

Another major facet of the internal Republican debate will be whether the GOP can hold the line on the earmarks moratorium, or whether appropriators will use letters and phone calls to pressure agencies into wasteful spending.

Experts saw the GOP ban on earmarks holding for now, but weakening over time.

David Williams of Citizens Against Government Waste said spending watchdog groups were jilted by the GOP in 1996 and are skeptical that it can hold the line on pork.

When Republicans swept to power after the 1994 election, they started out targeting waste but by 1996 were back to using earmarks to steer wasteful spending to vulnerable freshmen districts, he said.

Bixby agreed that the appropriators will be constrained in the short term by the focus on earmarks but that Congress will always be motivated to steer money to home districts.

Moylan and Wheeler agreed.

“When human nature changes, then it will change,” Wheeler said.

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