

CHAPTER 1

The Real Center of Power

Republicans have now won 7 of the last 10 presidential elections. We hold 55 Senate seats, 232 House seats, and 28 governorships. These facts underscore how much progress we have enjoyed in the last four decades, and it has been a remarkable rise for our party and our movement. But it is also a cautionary tale of what happens to a dominant party when its thinking becomes ossified, when its energy begins to drain, when an entitlement mentality takes over, and when political power becomes an end in itself rather than a means to achieve the greater good.

—KARL ROVE, ADDRESS TO THE CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL ACTION CONFERENCE,
RONALD REAGAN BUILDING, WASHINGTON, D.C., FEBRUARY 17, 2005

The security guard nodded as the stream of visitors trooped through the wood-paneled lobby at 1920 L Street in downtown Washington. It was Wednesday, and the guard was accustomed to the weekly influx of dark suits—150 or more—making their way to the elevators and up to the spacious conference room on

the second floor. The guard recognized some of the faces, the regulars as they trooped through on a balmy day in October 2005.

David Keene, chairman of the American Conservative Union, was a familiar face. So were staff members of the Bush White House and senior advisers to Senate majority leader Bill Frist and House Ways and Means Committee chairman Bill Thomas, along with a blue-chip sampling of the capital's most influential conservatives outside government. The others comprised a continually shifting collection of individuals—all of them more than willing to be labeled conservatives, yet representing a surprising diversity of backgrounds, viewpoints, and priorities. This diversity lifted the “Wednesday meeting,” as attendees called it, above the ordinary, and freighted it with the potential to change history.

As they entered the conference room on this particular Wednesday, most visitors hurried to find places among the rows of metal folding chairs. But most also took a moment to survey the large conference table in the center of the room. That's where the day's special guests would sit: a visiting cabinet secretary, a prominent Republican governor, the chairman of an important congressional committee, perhaps even Karl Rove, who made it a point to come several times each year. As the assemblage settled itself, advocates for causes ranging from sexual abstinence to criminalizing abortion and privatizing education passed among the rows, distributing petitions and invitations to rallies and other upcoming events.

The buzz of conversation faded as a diminutive, ruddy-faced man entered and took a seat at the center of the big table. “We have a fun-filled, star-studded agenda today,” he said. And with those words, one of the most important weekly conversations in the United States got under way again.

Though most Americans have never heard of it, the Wednesday meeting has come to play a unique role in the complex mechanism that conservative Republicans have assembled to further their dream of the “one-party country.” There are many power centers—in the White House, on Capitol Hill, and elsewhere—that are more important than this one, many places where conservative leaders meet and make decisions that shape the news of the day and even the

future of the country. What makes the Wednesday meeting so important is that it is a place where nearly all the leaders meet, where the diverse and sometimes uneasy bedfellows who form the conservative political movement in the early twenty-first century regularly come together. Catholic conservatives share space with Orthodox Jews. Gay members of the Log Cabin Republicans may sit beside Christians who believe homosexuality is a sin and, with God's help, can be cured. African American conservatives attend, as do their sometime-rivals, the Hispanic conservatives. There are also Pakistani Americans, Indian Americans, Iranian Americans, and Arab Americans. Libertarians mingle with conservative religious activists who are more than willing to use the coercive power of government to reshape American mores.

Lobbyists for Microsoft and Verizon are there, too, along with advocates for some of the rest of the Fortune 500. Their attitudes toward the government also vary—though their shifting positions on the issues of the day are more situational than abstract, tending to favor federal intervention when it furthers their interests and opposing it when they think it does not.

The meetings also include a generous sampling of policy wonks from the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and other think tanks, each reflecting a different hue in the conservative rainbow. Visiting politicians from around the globe drop in. And political hopefuls join frumpy job seekers working the crowd.

This diversity, reflected in the Wednesday meetings, has given twenty-first-century conservatism the breadth it would need to dominate American politics for the foreseeable future. But it is the complex interactions among the diverse groups and, more important, the strategies of leadership on display here that make such a vision more than a pipe dream.

The host, creator, and guiding hand behind the Wednesday meetings—and the state-level clones that have begun to pop up around the country in recent years—is a conservative activist named Grover Norquist, who heads a little-known organization called Americans for Tax Reform. The weekly meeting is held in the Americans for Tax Reform conference room, but the organization, like the

meeting and Norquist himself, does not confine itself to the issue of tax policy. Like many of the operatives who form the heart of today's conservative political network, Norquist got his start as a member of the College Republicans in the 1970s. It was there that his relationship with Rove began, but while Rove went on to focus on domestic politics, especially in the West and the Southwest, Norquist turned toward foreign policy. For several years, he traveled the globe advocating for anti-Communist rebels in Afghanistan, Latin America, and Africa. Norquist worked as a staff aide in Ronald Reagan's presidential campaigns in the 1980s. As the Cold War ebbed, he began to see domestic policy as the key to future conservative power, and his eye for the promising issue proved to be both keen and farsighted. In 1985, he founded Americans for Tax Reform, which pioneered the antitax movement that has become a central tenet of the conservative creed. Americans for Tax Reform was started, he says, at the suggestion of Ronald Reagan himself. It expanded and by 2004 had sprouted affiliates in nearly every state. Norquist also emerged as a behind-the-scenes architect of Newt Gingrich's Contract with America while helping to guide legislative and political campaigns on the state and national level into the 1990s. He drafted the no-new-taxes pledge that quickly became the conservative seal of approval for any would-be Republican politician. Dishonoring that pledge contributed to the defeat in 1992 of the first President Bush: he angered the movement by making a deal with congressional Democrats that brought fiscal restraint to the federal budget process—a traditional GOP goal—but also embraced higher taxes.

Norquist was, by his own description, an uncompromising conservative, a "market Leninist" who had declared war on the "bad guys" (Democrats) and anyone who sympathized with them. A decade later, his basic beliefs had not changed, much less his goals, but the secret of his increasing success was how he had modified his tactics. In the early days of the conservative resurgence, when the unflinching spirit of the GOP's 1964 standard-bearer, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, defined the movement, its energizing principle was a refusal to compromise. Norquist came to embrace a different approach, perhaps equally inflexible in its ultimate goals, but more

pragmatic in its daily operations. As embodied by Norquist of the Wednesday meeting, it is an attempt to bring to twenty-first-century conservatism the practical, big-tent principles of traditional American politics.

The change did not begin with Norquist and his weekly meetings, of course. In two terms as president, Ronald Reagan had carried the conservative creed into the White House and broadcast it to every region of the country. At the same time, he had been an eminently practical politician, too. Rhetorically, he embraced the conservative cause in its entirety, and he pursued many conservative policies. But he also took care never to endanger the real foundation of his political success—the great personal affection that millions of mainstream Americans felt for him. It was the fiercely anti-Communist Reagan, he of the “evil empire,” who held summit meetings with a leader of the Soviet Union that later helped bring about a peaceful end to the Cold War. It was Reagan, the right-to-life champion, who declined to appear in person at the massive antiabortion marches that annually looped their way around his White House, instead addressing the crowd by telephone. And it was Reagan who, in defiance of every Republican principle of fiscal responsibility, presided over a surge in deficit spending that doubled the national debt during eight years of uninterrupted peace. Reagan was a true conservative in his heart, in his words, and—when practicable—in his deeds. But the wellspring of his political career was his extraordinary personal gifts.

As conservatives such as Norquist and Rove understood, those gifts were nontransferable. It was useful to remind Americans of Reagan and his legacy, as Norquist did with his Ronald Reagan Legacy Project to name buildings, roads, and airports after the fortieth president. But nostalgia for Reagan would not serve as the foundation for lasting political strength. For such a foundation, for conservatives to think realistically about a one-party country, they would need institutions and mechanisms and organizations, resources that transcended a single individual. It was to this end that conservative strategists bent their energies. They tapped old sources of money not just to support candidates and campaigns but to create conservative think tanks that would nurture conservative scholars, writers,

and commentators. They linked up with Christian evangelical activists. They persuaded their traditional allies in corporate America to increase support for all this. Most important of all, they began to foster a powerful, if often tacit, alliance between business-oriented Republicans and social conservatives, persuading each to support the other's agenda even if it sometimes meant swallowing hard.

One example of the movement's strategic expansion was the K Street Project, named after the high-rent boulevard in downtown Washington that is home to many of the major lobbying shops, law firms, and trade associations. Historically, K Street had tended to be amoral in politics, filling its ranks with insiders from both political parties as insurance against shifts in the electoral winds. Norquist and other movement chieftains, including Representative Tom DeLay of Texas, the iron-fisted Republican leader in the House, set out to change that. They began to pressure the K Street firms, often successfully, to tilt sharply to the right in hiring. The labor unions, Norquist would say, hire ideologically compatible lobbying staff; business ought to do the same thing, bringing on board people who favor lower taxes, reduced government, and reining in lawsuits.

By 2000, the movement was on its way to building a political machine that would knit together the scattered resources of political power and influence in a single, well-coordinated network. The arrival of George W. Bush in the White House gave the network new power. During the Clinton years, Norquist and his comrades had operated as contemptuous outsiders. Now they became part of the capital's power structure. Conservatives extended their influence over all three branches of government, into the mainstream media, and into the states. At every level, they preached the necessity of staying on message and staying united, even when doing so necessitated compromises that might go against the grain of some conservative ideologues, or even against past commitments. As part of his efforts to unify the movement and the White House, Norquist worked closely with the Republican National Committee and Karl Rove as the administration pushed for passage of Bush priorities that some of the faithful might dislike but the leaders considered beneficial to the larger cause. Some fellow conservatives criticized Norquist, for

example, for not opposing a Bush-backed plan to add the costly prescription drug benefit to Medicare. The program was the first large-scale expansion of the government's health-care program for elderly Americans in decades. Budget hawks deplored the tens of billions of dollars it would add to a federal budget already soaring into the red. Small-government conservatives railed against the heresy of Republicans creating another big government program. But Rove and other strategists believed the drug benefit could help make senior voters a long-term part of the GOP's ruling coalition.

At the same time, Norquist and his organization—which by now had spawned counterparts in forty-eight cities from Seattle to Minneapolis to New York¹—served the immediate needs of the coalition. They threw themselves into the fights for tax cuts and private investment accounts in Social Security. And Norquist pushed pet causes such as outsourcing government jobs to private contractors and reducing the influence of government labor unions, both of which tended to strengthen the GOP's hold on power. Unions, after all, had been stalwarts of the Democratic coalition dating back to the days of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Unions of government workers were among the few healthy survivors of that long-ago time. They were now prime targets. As for outsourcing, which paid private firms to do work otherwise done by government employees, it emerged as a modern-day system of spoils and patronage.

Beyond all this, however, Norquist's biggest contribution to the conservative movement was establishing the Wednesday meeting. No greater testament to its importance can be found than the envy of Democratic strategists and liberal activists across the country who have thus far labored in vain to create a mechanism with such reach and unity of purpose and action.

The meetings bring together nearly every conservative interest in Washington: big-business lobbyists advocating deregulation, home-schoolers opposing the public education "monopoly," libertarians decrying big government, and evangelicals eager to keep the courts from endorsing gay marriages or prohibiting classroom instruction in Intelligent Design. The unifying concern for most of these disparate groups, Norquist says, is keeping the government off their backs.

Through the strength of this connecting thread of philosophy and Norquist's hyperactive, peripatetic personality, the groups represented at his meetings remain together most of the time, though the centrifugal force that threatens any such diverse coalition is plain to see, and may ultimately prove stronger than anything Norquist and his friends can do to keep it together. That's why, each week, they take pains to remind their guests of what they have in common, of the movement's long-term goals and short-term priorities—and of what might happen if the movement flies apart and the liberals take charge once more.

The meetings are, to a significant degree, a vital nerve center for conservative Republicans' continued unity and success. Understand what goes on in the room each week and you can see why conservatives—despite scandals, sliding presidential approval ratings, and party infighting—still have a chance to bury for good the Democratic coalition and reign dominant for decades to come.

The room also provides historical context. The list of attendees often includes such longtime leaders of the conservative movement as Phyllis Schlafly of the Eagle Forum, David Keene of the American Conservative Union, and Morton Blackwell, president of the Leadership Institute that has trained young conservatives since 1979. Doughty and aging, they represent the mid-twentieth-century visionaries who waged the early fight from the fringes. They endured scorn from many in the press and their own party, but they helped shape the positions and sharpen the rhetoric that would later become party doctrine. Keene's American Conservative Union, for instance, hosted an annual conference for thirty years that for the most part drew lonely conservative college kids and far-right academics. His efforts gained respectability and power during the Reagan years; Reagan himself was a regular speaker at the conference. By 2005, the annual gathering had grown into a sellout event, attended by thousands of students from major universities who give rock-star treatment to presenters such as Rove and Vice President Dick Cheney. Norquist likes to say that Schlafly, Keene, and Blackwell “were far-right conservatives before it was cool.”²

Aspiring collegiate politicians from major universities also seek

admission to Norquist's meetings and compete for internships with the myriad organizations represented there. Lobbyists seek his counsel and support but must wait in line behind members of Congress, White House staff, and a national press corps that attentively seeks Norquist's opinions even though he views many of its members with contempt.

The Wednesday meetings routinely feature appearances by researchers from the conservative foundations that provide intellectual heft and respectability to the movement. Their upcoming conferences and seminars are announced at the Wednesday gatherings, and their handsomely published research papers are distributed.

Some of those in attendance—former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, pollster Kellyanne Conway, and former Republican representative Bob Barr of Georgia—are recognizable as news analysts on cable television, especially on the Fox News Channel. As a general rule, working journalists are admitted only after they have been screened by Norquist and his staff and have agreed to strict ground rules governing what can be later published or broadcast.³ But some are always welcome, such as John Fund of the *Wall Street Journal's* online opinion page, who once described Norquist as “the grand central station” of modern conservatism.⁴ So are Robert George, a conservative editorial writer for the *New York Post* and *National Review*, and Ralph Z. Hallow of the *Washington Times*, along with an editorial assistant for columnist Robert Novak.

As the parade of candidates that shows up each week knows, the gathering is more than just a gab fest and idea exchange. It provides the Bush White House with a link to the Washington offices of the wide array of groups that make up the conservative movement, from the National Rifle Association and the National Right to Life organization to the Property Rights Coalition and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The meetings also provide a forum for testing ideas. It is at this gathering that conservatives are likely to learn first about an administration initiative, such as the controversial push for steel tariffs in 2002 or the more recent Medicare drug program. And it is here that the White House can sound the trumpet for grassroots support for its initiatives and its nominees. Only at the Wednesday meeting

can one so readily and efficiently reach millions of conservative activists with a common message.

The Wednesday meeting performs a wide array of services for the conservative cause, but its continued importance on the Washington calendar rests primarily on the fact that Norquist has demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to bridge ideological and cultural gaps. Time and again—to the despair and secret envy of his opponents on the left—he has persuaded disparate interest groups to look past their differences and see their shared goals. When the auto industry needed help in its fight against federal fuel efficiency standards in the mid-1990s, for example, Norquist convinced social conservatives preoccupied with teen pregnancy and prayer in school that the energy standards were their fight, too. He talked Phyllis Schlafly into seeing fuel standards as a form of “back-door family planning.”

“You can’t have a whole lot of kids in a tiny fuel-efficient car,” Norquist says he told her. And, he says, Schlafly agreed, telling him, “I hate those cars.”⁵

Norquist has even bridged divides between the most mortal of all enemies, Muslims and Jews. A handful of his fellow conservatives have accused him of associating with terrorist sympathizers, but he has rejected the criticism and persisted, drawing to the Wednesday meetings Near Eastern and other Muslims who partner with Orthodox Jews and pro-Israel activists in pursuit of the one-party cause. Working with lobbyist Jack Abramoff, an Orthodox Jew, Norquist encouraged Jewish Republican activism, even allowing the Orthodox organization Toward Tradition to use Americans for Tax Reform headquarters as its Washington office. At the same time, Norquist helped found the Islamic Free Market Institute, which raised money and sponsored conferences to promote conservative ideas in the United States and the Muslim world. In 2005, Norquist’s outreach took a personal turn when he wed a young Muslim woman, Samah Alrayyes, who once worked as communications director for the Islamic institute he helped create.

A few members of the conservative alliance, notably former Reagan defense official Frank Gaffney, complained that Norquist was providing terrorist sympathizers with creditability and access to the

White House.⁶ One of the Muslims who drew special attention from Gaffney's campaign was Suhail Khan, a Transportation Department official formerly in the White House outreach office. Khan's late father was affiliated with a mosque once visited by a top Al Qaeda leader traveling under an assumed identity to raise funds in the United States. There was no indication that Khan's father was personally aware of the visit by Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, but Gaffney and his allies continued to raise questions about the younger Khan and other Muslim Americans working in the administration. In 2003, Rove was asked about Gaffney's concerns with Norquist and his Muslim associates. The presidential adviser rejected the charges as having no substance. "There's no there there," Rove said.⁷

Norquist angrily slammed Gaffney as racist and unfair and banned him from attending the Wednesday meetings. Meanwhile, Norquist has remained close to Khan, soliciting advice from the young lawyer and asking Khan to chair the meetings in his absence. Khan continued to be active in movement and presidential politics, organizing Indian Americans of all faiths into a formidable new Republican group that helped raise more than \$1 million for the Bush campaign in 2004. During this period, Norquist also continued to encourage the GOP as a whole to court Muslim voters, a traditionally Democratic voting group.

An equally striking example of Norquist's impulse to probe for conservative toeholds in seemingly unpromising quarters occurred in the late 1990s. The recording industry was fighting rampant piracy of CDs and pressing for passage of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, a controversial law to criminalize black-market technology that could copy music and movies. The industry's problem was that Republicans ruled Congress, and the industry was led by Hollywood liberals, who were not exactly insiders to the burgeoning one-party movement. Norquist viewed the law as an idea consistent with conservative principles, and he saw an opportunity to make new friends. So he enlisted another element of his center-right coalition, the rural activists who were asserting the primacy of private property rights over government efforts to take over western lands. He made the case—successfully—that the blue-state recording industry and the red-state

ranchers and farmers had a common desire to protect ownership. The law was passed with the support of western lawmakers such as Senator Conrad Burns of Montana and Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah and then House majority leader Dick Armey. And the bread that Norquist had cast upon the waters came back cake. The recording industry was motivated to hire Republican lobbyists, and GOP candidates suddenly won greater financial support from a traditionally Democratic industry.

Hilary Rosen, who ran the Recording Industry Association of America until 2003, called Norquist “central” to winning support in the Republican-controlled Congress. The industry itself had been able to muster strong support among representatives of such media-savvy urban centers as New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville, she recalled. But that was not enough; victory was assured only when Norquist brought western and Southern lawmakers to the fight.

Rosen, a Democrat and gay rights advocate, directed her organization to pay a \$10,000 fee to join Americans for Tax Reform, and she subsequently met with Norquist at his Capitol Hill town house for a series of dinner seminars. She also sent Republican staffers to his Wednesday meetings. Norquist subsequently helped organize a formal property rights alliance that would go on to meet regularly and plan future cooperation on policy proposals. Rosen lamented that the Democrats “don’t have a Norquist or a Wednesday meeting.”⁸

Other liberals have attended and addressed the Wednesday group, including billionaire philanthropist George Soros, Al Gore, and Gore’s 2000 campaign manager, Donna Brazile. Brazile won applause at a meeting in early 2005 acknowledging the gains of Republicans in getting out the vote in the 2004 election, particularly in reaching African American voters. Norquist found common ground with Brazile: her Washington lobbying practice includes developers pushing to end the District of Columbia’s nineteenth-century restrictions on constructing buildings taller than the Capitol, a restriction any free-market capitalist or libertarian would love to hate. “We found we had a lot in common,” Norquist said after meeting Brazile. “She’s religious, from a military family, believes in hard work. She’s a natural Republican; she just doesn’t know it yet.” Brazile laughed at Norquist’s

suggestion but acknowledged envy. “Grover and Rove and those guys have so much going for them. They are unified in their opposition to Democrats and they are organized,” she said.⁹

Norquist and his meetings are not without their detractors. Some GOP stalwarts question the value of the eclectic crowd. One well-placed administration official once likened the gathering to a “*Star Wars* bar.” And in hindsight, some Wednesday meeting veterans are disturbed by the memory of sessions in the 1990s when Norquist focused, however briefly, on a peculiarly remote topic: the tiny Marianna Islands in the South Pacific. Marshall Wittman, an attendee during that period, says he wondered why the islands deserved the movement’s support because their leaders were struggling to establish free-market capitalism against a backdrop of restrictive U.S. regulations. What Norquist did not mention then is that officials in the Mariannas had hired his old friend Abramoff as their lobbyist.¹⁰

Norquist says that Wittman, who has gone on to work for the Democratic Leadership Council, exaggerated the attention the Wednesday meeting gave to the Mariannas. But Abramoff has pled guilty to federal fraud charges in 2006, and e-mails reveal he directed his Indian gambling clients to contribute substantial sums to Norquist’s antitax organization. This may not be illegal, but the episodes have brought a whiff of scandal to the meetings. Norquist protests that the negative associations are unfair and that no investigator has yet suggested he or his organization has done anything wrong. His very predicament illustrates the dangers that lurk beneath the surface of an operation that brings together the world of high-stakes lobbying, interest group politics, elections, and legislation.

Norquist waves away such unpleasantness, keeping his eyes on the one-party prize. In his pocket calendar, he keeps a scrap of paper with his long-term goals: ending tax increases, privatizing Social Security, shrinking the federal government, privatizing the postal service. The thread tying together every goal is a belief in market-based approaches, and the conviction that those approaches will attract legions of voters to the GOP for years to come.

“The more independent people you have, the more Republicans you’ve created,” Norquist said. “The more savers and investors and

owners of homes and shares—the more Republicans. The more gun owners, the more Republicans. The more self-employed people—the more Republicans. On the other hand, the more government workers, the more trial lawyers, the more Democrats. So it is a virtuous cycle, where sound policy from a Reagan Republican standpoint is sound politics.”¹¹

Norquist elaborated on that point in an opinion article in 2004: “Big-city Democratic political machines thrive on federal grants and state-granted powers.” And the coercive utopians—the radical environmentalists, animal-rights activists, feminists, and others who would use state power to force on us tiny non-flushable toilets and cars too small to hold families, take away the circus and our pet cats, and otherwise impose more fusbudget impositions on our lives than Leviticus—all depend on government grants to use and misuse federal and state power. But outside state power, the Democratic coalition withers and dies. Without effective control of the government, the Democratic Party is like a fish out of water, a vampire in the sun, Antaeus held aloft, an appliance unplugged.”¹²

Thus, as Norquist sees it, the Republicans’ present political power springs from successful attacks on government over the past three decades. And continuing those attacks is what will keep Republicans in power. With Democrats lacking an effective beachhead in Congress, and the GOP still in charge, Republicans can continue to harness the power of policy making to pursue their goals while obstructing the other side. Norquist ticks off enemy targets: trial lawyers, labor unions, government employees. All will be damaged as the conservative agenda moves forward. In a way, the strategy sounds obvious. But imagine a Democrat speaking in similar terms. Is there a liberal idea—like raising the minimum wage or creating health care for all—specifically designed to advance a policy goal but also to undermine the Republican Party and its ability to function?

Norquist believes that private enterprise has become the people’s champion. Government, he hopes, will be seen increasingly as antithetical to the general welfare.

“My goal is to shrink the size of government in half over the next twenty-five years,” Norquist said, cutting it from 33 percent of GDP in

2005 to 16 percent or less in a quarter century. Speaking hyperbolically, he said, “I don’t want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.”¹³

If the image seems a bit rough, Norquist has a reputation for playing rough with those who cross him, his organization, or their conservative principles. The first President Bush felt the sting when he broke the tax pledge and then suffered a humiliating defeat in 1992, due at least in part to the anger of Norquist and other disaffected conservatives. That election contained many lessons for Republicans, not least for the defeated president’s son, George W. Bush. But in Washington at least, it taught ambitious Republicans to respect the network and to ignore its power at their peril.

Certainly that lesson was not lost on those who gathered in Norquist’s big conference room that day in October 2005. They all shared Norquist’s dream of building a conservative movement so strong that for all practical purposes the United States would become a one-party country. And they shared their host’s specific goal of dismantling the half-century-old pillars of the Democratic party: the social welfare programs that began in the New Deal and blossomed under Lyndon Baines Johnson, the labor movement that provided money and manpower for Democratic campaigns, the loyalty of minority and immigrant voters, and the underlying public faith that government was a force for good.

And the men and women sitting around the conference table and occupying the ranks of folding chairs had reason to be hopeful that day. Their president had scored a reelection victory. He did not owe that victory to compromises aimed at winning over moderate and independent voters, the usual formula for winning a presidential election. Instead, Bush’s triumph came from the extraordinary ability of the conservative movement to turn out the base. The conservative network had not only reelected Bush, it had expanded the GOP majority in Congress and maintained the majority of governorships—twenty-eight—in the hands of Republicans.

Yet, for all of those achievements, there was an undercurrent of

anxiety as Norquist called the weekly session to order on October 19, 2005. That very morning, a Texas court was issuing an arrest warrant for House majority leader Tom DeLay on charges of money laundering and conspiracy. In Washington, a federal prosecutor had already indicted a senior aide to Vice President Cheney in the long-running investigation over the leak of a covert CIA officer's identity; the prosecutor was still weighing whether to bring charges against Karl Rove as well. Moreover, Norquist and fellow conservative strategist Ralph Reed, founder of the Christian Coalition and a key idea man in the GOP leadership, were being mentioned in press reports about a separate corruption investigation of Jack Abramoff.

Tension was high in the room for other reasons, too. Just two weeks earlier, participants had savaged Ed Gillespie, the former Republican National Committee chairman and loyal movement soldier. Gillespie had come before the Wednesday meeting as an envoy from the White House seeking support for the president's latest Supreme Court nominee, Harriet Miers. Angry objections voiced during that meeting helped fuel a rebellion over the fact that Bush had nominated his friend Miers rather than the kind of well-known conservative jurist these activists believed he had promised to appoint. Miers ultimately withdrew to quell the revolt, but the episode had left bruises. It had also demonstrated the challenge of maintaining unity in an increasingly large and diverse coalition.

The Miers dispute had come at a time when the movement was already showing signs of trouble: Hurricane Katrina had just devastated New Orleans and other Gulf Coast communities. Everyone shared the Gulf Coast's pain, of course. But small-government fiscal conservatives, already upset about pork-barrel spending under the GOP, were unhappy with others in the party who wanted the government to play a central—and costly—role in rebuilding the region. And the spectacle of the federal government bumbling its initial response to the massive natural disaster did no one in the Republican Party any good.

Those tensions were on display now. The audience heard first from Paul Teller, a senior House staffer representing conservative members who had been sounding the alarms on post-Katrina spending plans. Next was Tom Schatz of Citizens Against Government

Waste, publisher of the annual *Congressional Pig Book*, with another warning about excessive spending.

As the presenters continued with their reports, a buzz rose across the room. Heads turned toward the door. A surprise guest had arrived. Tom DeLay himself—under indictment and derided by Democrats as the poster boy for Republican hubris and overreach—had come to the pulsing heart of the conservative movement he had helped to build. DeLay and Norquist had never been particularly close, and the former House majority leader had recently irritated others in the room when he tried to argue that government excess had been tamed despite an explosion of spending on bridges, roads, community centers, and other hometown projects. Still, everyone knew DeLay was a critical cog in their machine. And they knew the party line on his legal troubles: the Texas prosecutor who brought the charges was nothing but a Democratic Party attack dog.

Apparently undaunted, DeLay strode to the center of the room grinning broadly. Standing in front of the conference table, he glanced around where he could see a former colleague from the House whom he had helped elect, aides to the president with whom he had plotted strategy, and lobbyists whose jobs he had helped secure.

“So,” DeLay said, “how has your month been?”

The crowd erupted in laughter and cheers.

DeLay did not directly address the charges against him, speaking instead that day about the importance of curbing federal largesse, even apologizing at one point for his earlier suggestion that spending was in check. The House would get the job done, he said. The Senate, he implied, might benefit from some pressure from the assembled group.

The message was clear: even when one of the movement’s leaders was in trouble, the crusade must still focus on conservative ideals and the ultimate goal: building a one-party country. DeLay’s legal foibles were potentially embarrassing. But the modern conservative movement, once so reliant on the fate of individual leaders like Speaker Newt Gingrich in the mid-1990s, had matured. It had built a firm foundation that transcended individuals.

“It is larger now than any one man,” Norquist said.

