What if the GOP wins in November?

By Tod Lindberg

Suppose we wake up on the morning of Wednesday, Nov. 9 this year and discover that the Republicans have won. Really won. Say, 40 seats or more in the House and seven or more in the Senate, giving them a majority in both houses. What happens then?

This isn't a completely idle question. Opposition parties pick up an average of 18 House seats in the mid-term elections, and there are several reasons to expect Republicans to surpass that number in November.

Republicans have done extremely well in elections since November 1992: a House seat in Oklahoma, another in Kentucky, governorships in New Jersey and Virginia, and mayoralties in Los Angeles and New York.

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One reason: President Clinton is personally unpopular. He took office with only 43 percent of the vote, and dissatisfaction with his agenda plus two major scandals — Whitewater and Troopergate — have kept his approval ratings low. Already the White House has rebuked a Democratic National Committee spokesman for implying that Democratic candidates could safely distance themselves from the president this fall.

Moreover, the grassroots popularity of term limits has underscored a deep-seated anti-incumbent mood among voters. This hurts Democrats more than Republicans. Other factors include: a huge, vulnerable freshman class; the fact that Republicans are running more candidates against incumbents than their Democratic counterparts; and the fact that there are more competitive Democratic seats up for grabs than Republican ones. All these could be factors in a Republican November election coup.

Republican enthusiasts, unsurprisingly, promise a new dawn in American politics — an opportunity at last to deliver on the GOP's conservative vision, whatever it may be. Realistically, however, what could a GOP Congress expect to achieve?

The context, of course, is two years of divided government, the White House under the control of a Democrat. There are dangers in this for the GOP. If Ronald Reagan had his "Boll Weevil" Democrats, President Clinton is apt to try to find his "Cockroach" Republicans, to coin a term. Moreover, intense jockeying for position among Republican contenders for president in 1996 — and the ego struggles that ensue over who is associated with which policy — might hurt the Republicans' ability to reach consensus on a legislative agenda.

But there will be serious efforts to forge such a consensus. For starters, laws allowing massive expansions of government into the private sector and private lives of Americans — on everything from health care to gun control to education to labor — would become extremely difficult for the administration to push through Congress. Beyond that, Rep. Newt Gingrich, who will take over for Robert Michel as GOP House leader, is already putting together a plan for "the first 90 days" — a legislative blitzkrieg to define a Republican national agenda in case the GOP wins big this year.

Republicans will want to do two things right away: cut taxes and reduce spending. This year's GOP substitute budget is a likely model. Its central features included indexing capital gains for inflation, as a shot in the arm for the entrepreneur economy, as well as a $500 per-child tax credit. This would pit deficit hawks against anti-tax hawks, but the anti-taxers could win by paying for the tax cuts with equal cuts in spending — as this year's GOP budget did. The tax credit is central, because the idea of helping and rewarding the family is essential Republican doctrine and appeals to both parties. The president is rhetorically committed to it himself. From pro-choice suburban women to pro-life southern evangelicals, everyone could get on board.

While spending cuts always pose political problems, the difficulties would be minuscule compared to those in the current Democrat-controlled Congress. Important spending-cut mechanisms that have been frustrated by the administration and the Democratic leadership likely would see the light of day. For example, an "A to Z"-style proposal, whereby each member of Congress gets to offer a spending cut for an up or down vote by the

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whole House, could be easily enacted. And a balanced-budget amendment could pass.

As for social policy in areas ranging from health care to welfare, the veto power of the president is apt to curtail drastic changes from Capitol Hill. The GOP will, however, be in a position to articulate a clear vision for such policy — if its views are in fact clear.

Defense is one area in which the GOP is quite united — in opposition to the speed and severity of the administration's cutbacks. We would certainly see an effort to restore defense spending to levels closer to those agreed by President Bush and former Joints Chiefs Chairman Colin Powell. The administration could easily go along, citing new international dangers, perhaps.

And, in another important area of Congressional responsibility, oversight, the administration will no longer be able to escape potentially embarrassing scrutiny from Capitol Hill. In fact, this might well prove to be the most dramatic difference from Democratic control. Moderate and liberal GOP senators and House members have been no less angered than right-wing firebrands by congressional Democrats' efforts to shut down inquiry. Hell hath no fury like a moderate Republican in pursuit of his oversight responsibilities.

The past two Republican presidents were criticized for not selling the message that they needed more Republicans in Congress to deliver on their agenda. It may be that with Bill Clinton in the White House, Republicans in Congress will succeed where Mr. Reagan and Mr. Bush failed. As of now, the possibilities are wide open.