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Outwardly, the House GOP is gearing up to take on Democrats this fall. Inwardly, it's in disarray, engaged in a fight over the soul of the party. The reformers demand the leadership aggressively define itself on health care, earmarks and spending; the fat and happy push back, insisting their pork and their farm bills are necessary for re-election.

In the middle is the minority leader, who has so far walked a tightrope. Yet this is a fight that must be resolved, and definitively, if the GOP wants out of the wilderness. Mr. Boehner's choice: To join with the reformers, Gingrich-like, and rally the troops around a bold agenda, or to find himself, Michel-like, a footnote in minority history.

The GOP has been quarrelling over its image ever since its 2006 electoral banishment. But the fight got nastier after the party lost two special congressional elections in May. The Republican Study Committee's 105 conservatives have been aggressively challenging the leadership's agenda (which it views as too fuzzy) and its refusal to rein in pork. The appropriator kings have banded together to block reform, and have so far been winning the battle.

Mr. Boehner's heart is undoubtedly with the reformers. He's never asked for an earmark, never received one. He's shepherded his own change legislation, most notably 2006 legislation overhauling private pensions. On any individual issue, his personal vote mirrors that of the reform bloc.

His head, however, has been with keeping the peace. The minority leader likes consensus, and

goes where the majority of the party wants. Yet parties, by definition, become minorities because the bulk of the members go wrong. They need their leaders to look ahead, aggressively redefine the message, inspire and, if need be, wrangle members into place. Love or hate Mr. Gingrich, he got it.

Mr. Boehner's other defining strategy has been to focus the party's energies on the opposition, hammering Democratic policies. He's been rewarded on several issues, most recently the energy debate and a victory on wiretapping authority.

Yet that approach has allowed the party itself to dodge the tougher question of how it will define *itself*

, so necessary to reconnect with conservative voters.

**"We have not shown the American people that congressional Republicans today are different from the Republicans they voted out," California Republican John Campbell tells me. "Much of our congressional leadership does not believe we did anything wrong or are currently doing anything wrong. But we did, and we are."**

How does the middle-of-the-road approach translate in real life? Back in January, at the House GOP retreat, the members were in the middle of a vote to adopt a unilateral earmark moratorium and conservatives smelled victory. That's when the GOP leadership team stopped the vote, went into a huddle, and later announced the party would swear off pork, but only if the Democrats did too. The spenders knew Nancy Pelosi would never bite (she didn't), and so they're still earmarking like mad, unable to criticize the other side.

Or take ethics. When appropriator John Doolittle stepped down a year ago over a corruption investigation, reformers pushed to install a fiscal conservative. Instead, the leadership bestowed its blessing on California Rep. Ken Calvert, who is himself dogged with earmark accusations. Twin him with Alaska Rep. Don Young, who is facing a possible indictment, and the party's also been unable to hit on ethics.

Spending? When Democrats brought up a bloated \$300 billion farm bill, the reformers hoped

leadership would whip the members against it, and demonstrate to the public the party's small-government principles. Mr. Boehner himself condemned the bill, and urged members to vote against it. Even as he did, two members of his leadership team – Roy Blunt and Adam Putnam – were telling members it was a free-for-all, and voted for the bill themselves.

What's at stake here isn't just Mr. Boehner's future (there is already talk of a leadership challenge), but the party's. Republicans are down to 199 members, and a blowout this fall could leave them positioned for a long minority run. The party regulars could care less; for them, minority status means 40% of the pork instead of 60%. But what happens to the next generation of reformers who'd understandably prefer to run for governor, or make a bundle in the private sector, than languish in second-place?

There have been recent signs Mr. Boehner is taking a stronger line, but it may be too late. The leader showed up at this week's GOP meeting demanding his members vote against a bill that would raise Medicare payments for doctors, but do so by gutting free-market Medicare plans. When Georgia's Phil Gingrey pushed back, Mr. Boehner threatened to deny him a plum committee assignment.

Not long after, 129 Republicans defected to vote with the Democrats. Mr. Gingrey was one of them.