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Gilmore takes helm of Free Congress

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Former Virginia Gov. James S. Gilmore III, widely regarded as a traditional conservative, is taking over the reins of the Free Congress Foundation -- a major outside influence on Republican Party policy and especially in moving the party to a new emphasis on traditional social and religious values.

The foundation's board elected Mr. Gilmore earlier this month to fill the roles of president and chief operating officer once held by Paul M. Weyrich, who founded the group and made it the epicenter of the American conservative movement for many years.

The selection of Mr. Gilmore, a former chairman of the Republican National Committee under President George W. Bush, has the potential to affect the political/ideological landscape of a Republican Party and conservative wing dominated by advocates of an expansive and expensive U.S. military engagement abroad -- for what critics and some advocates call "nation-building" -- who support a war on "Islamofascism."

"Gilmore is a small-government man with a healthy respect for individual rights and the concept of limited government -- and a tough-minded realist rather than an isolationist or a neoconservative on foreign policy," said David A. Keene, chairman of the American Conservative Union.

Weyrich, who died in 2008, generally favored restraint in U.S. military intervention abroad.

"Gilmore, like Weyrich, is a Reagan Republican who stands for limited government and prefers a republic to an empire," said Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform.

Precisely what role the foundation will play and how it will differ from other conservative activist groups and think tanks such as the American Conservative Union, the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Hoover Institution, Newt Gingrich's American Solutions and the libertarian Cato Institute is unclear.

"We have to address four fundamental issues facing America," said Mr. Gilmore, who highlighted fiscal policy, which he said has a "direct bearing on people's liberty"; environmental policy, which under President Obama's direction "threatens to take over the U.S. economy"; traditional social values; and foreign policy.

Although he was a former Virginia attorney general and once the head of a federal anti-terrorism task force, Mr. Gilmore said he will not practice law but instead will be the full-time, paid president of Free Congress.

Often showing an independent streak, Mr. Gilmore, whom Mr. Bush chose to head the RNC in 2001, came to blows with Mr. Bush's chief political guru, Karl Rove, and was eased out as national chairman.

Free Congress set itself apart from the other major conservative organizations in that it was less enthusiastic about a global war on terrorism and about fighting on foreign soil to create governments abroad in America's image.

But David Horowitz, a former liberal who founded the Center for the Study of Popular Culture, sees in Mr. Gilmore no threat to neoconservatism or any other "ism" on the right.

"I'm a free-marketeer, and I like it when there are people fighting each other on the right - as long as they don't fight too much," Mr. Horowitz told The Times.

The nine-member Free Congress board elected Mr. Gilmore with a mandate to carry on the work that Weyrich had been doing since co-founding, in the early 1970s, the Heritage Foundation with Edwin J. Feulner Jr. He left Heritage to establish Free Congress and emulate the Democratic Party's labor and liberal-left organizations that coordinated actions and policies for elected Democrats at the congressional level and below.

"Free Congress has always played a major role in the movement," Mr. Keene said. "Jim Gilmore has a solid record as governor, as the head of the anti-terrorism commission, and so he gives Free Congress the chance to continue its influence as a traditional conservative organization."

Since Weyrich's death on Dec. 18, 2008, the townhouses that Free Congress occupied on Capitol Hill have been sold and new headquarters have been established across the river in Alexandria, but Mr. Gilmore hopes to raise money to move the foundation back to the District of Columbia.

While some on the Free Congress board wanted to dissolve the organization, Mr. Gilmore and other board members -- including the board chairman, Rep. Ralph M. Hall, Texas Republican, and Leadership Institute President Morton Blackwell -- prevailed in wanting to continue it under Mr. Gilmore's leadership.