

It may not be rock bottom for the GOP, but a freshly tapped Republican Senate leadership team certainly sounded that way Tuesday as they uniformly pledged to start the painful process of rebuilding a battered party from the ground up.

That makeover started just moments after a depleted Senate Republican Conference renewed the job contracts of its top three leaders, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), Minority Whip Jon Kyl (Ariz.) and Conference Chairman Lamar Alexander (Tenn.). A few job changes occurred lower in the ranks, and just one new face was added — Sen. John Thune (S.D.) as the Conference vice chairman.

Senate Republicans said despite bruising losses on Nov. 4 that sent them deeper into the minority, they remained confident in their current team's ability to turn the party around.

"The leadership of the Republican Conference was never a question in this election," Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.) said Tuesday, arguing that Republicans should take note of the party's history. Isakson, who was elected to the House in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, noted that after a relatively short period of reconstruction, the GOP swept into power in 1980.

"I think the party changes will sort themselves out," Isakson said. "I was elected post-Watergate, and the party sorted itself out, and look what happened. Five years later we had Ronald Reagan.

"I think we're poised to do nothing but improve," he said.

Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.) agreed, predicting McConnell would emerge as a more dynamic leader in the 111th Congress. Burr and others noted that with the departure of President George W. Bush, McConnell will be free of the constraints placed on him by an unpopular White House. McConnell spent much of 2008 trying to serve three masters: Bush, his Conference and his own re-election campaign.

"Mitch McConnell has a much different hand now than he did the last two years," Burr argued.

A senior GOP leadership aide agreed with Burr, but cautioned that it will be important for McConnell to show strong leadership over coming months. "This is going to be a time for McConnell to show what kind of leader he can be. He exceeded expectations in his election back home, and I think he may exceed expectations up here," the aide said.

Nevertheless, Senate Republicans cautioned that significant changes were in store, and that Members must be prepared for a difficult transition. "Now it's a matter of managing expectations," the leadership aide explained.

For instance, while Republicans were wildly successful in tripping up much of the Democratic agenda over the past two years, they no longer have the power of a 49-Member minority. Now, just a handful of votes separate Democrats from reaching a filibuster-proof, 60-vote margin, and McConnell will be hard-pressed to stop the majority party as consistently this session.

Republicans will also have to learn how to be a true minority party again, one Republican said, pointing out that dozens of members of the Conference never served in the Senate when Democrats controlled both the Congress and White House.

“We’ve got the ‘Old Bulls,’ but that’s about it,” the Republican said.

Indeed, McConnell and other leaders during a press conference following their leadership elections Tuesday warned that the party would need to go through significant changes over the coming weeks and months.

“The voters have spoken. We were not very happy with the outcome, as you can imagine. But we’ve been here before, and we’re looking for — we will begin to look for the way back starting later today,” McConnell said. “Several of us remember being here in ’93 and ’94 when we had a Democratic president, a Democratic House and a Democratic Senate. We know how to find our way back.”

Newly crowned National Republican Senatorial Committee Chairman John Cornyn (Texas) acknowledged that a lot of rebuilding needs to be done, and said he would quickly begin modernizing the Senate Republicans’ campaign arm to make up ground in the fundraising and candidate recruitment arenas.

Cornyn also said it is critical for Republicans to begin the process of transforming their principles into practical solutions that can help the party win elections — a theme that Alexander, the Conference chairman, has repeatedly pressed since the November elections.

Republicans need to “make sure those right policies and right principles translate into wins at the ballot box in 2010,” Cornyn argued.

Thune said: “We can’t be the anti, the ‘no’ party.”

“I think the challenge before us is to present clear ideas and policy alternatives,” Thune added.

But even as the Conference looked to press ahead, it continued to have difficulty shaking the past as embattled Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) vowed to stay on if re-elected to another term, and Members balked at efforts to expel him from the GOP ranks, at least for now.

Facing strong opposition from his colleagues, Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) at the last minute yanked a motion to expel Stevens from the Conference and strip him of his committee assignments. DeMint bowed to arguments from Republicans who urged him to not pursue the vote until after the results of Stevens' re-election are known.

Stevens at press time was trailing Anchorage Mayor Mark Begich (D) by just more than 2,000 votes. Stevens was handed down a seven-count felony conviction in federal court last month.

Although lawmakers sought to downplay the importance of Stevens' continued presence in the Senate, he continued to draw fire from within his own party.

Two conservative House lawmakers on Tuesday called for an investigation into Stevens' fiscal 2008 earmarks. Reps. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) and **John Campbell (R-Calif.)** requested that the House and Senate Appropriations committees conduct reviews of the 39 earmarks requested by Stevens last year.

"Despite the fact that Sen. Stevens was under indictment for corruption charges, his 39 earmarks worth \$240 million received scant scrutiny this year. I would hope that his conviction spurs Congress to examine these earmarks more closely before they are awarded," Flake said.