

Withered Conservatism

Conservatives bicker about spending and abortion but refuse to face the real cause of the Republican rout.

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

AFTER TWO DEVASTATING election cycles for the GOP, conservatives were expected to “rethink” their movement. Signs of dissent and disintegration among the Right were everywhere in the months leading up to the election. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks called the lovefest for Sarah Palin a “cancer” on the Republican Party. Rush Limbaugh used his microphone to attack John McCain for not attacking Barack Obama and to assail moderates for their capitulations to liberalism. *National Review Online* columnist Kathleen Parker blamed electoral defeats on the influence of the Religious Right. After joining the growing ranks of Obamacons, Christopher Buckley resigned from the magazine his father founded. But Obama’s victory did not bring the anticipated recriminations among the defeated. In fact, the conservative movement isn’t rethinking much of anything.

The acceptable lines of debate among conservatives were drawn six days after the election by David Brooks. On one side he put “traditionalists” who “argue the G.O.P. should return to its core ideas: Cut government, cut taxes, restrict immigration.” He deemed Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh the leaders of this faction. On the other side he put “reformers” who want to modernize the party so that it appeals to Hispanics and younger voters and addresses the economic insecurities of the middle class. This group includes some neoconserva-

tives like David Frum and Brooks himself, along with Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam, authors of the domestic-policy tract *Grand New Party*.

National Review’s post-election conference, “Whither Conservatism,” cast intra-conservative debates along similar lines. In a panel on domestic policy, Kim Strassel of the *Wall Street Journal* played the role of “traditionalist,” arguing for stringent free-marketism and broad tax cuts, while *National Review’s* “reformer,” Jim Manzi, focused on suburban issues like sprawl and transportation. A discussion titled “The Future of Conservatism,” moderated by Brooks, featured Douthat and Ramesh Ponnuru on the reformer side, with *NR’s* Jonah Goldberg, Hillsdale’s David Bobb and Cato’s Gene Healy arguing for a return to the party’s old playbook. Panel members essentially argued that they each represented the future of conservatism.

Framed as a struggle between these two factions, the debate about conservatism descends quickly into details about domestic policy. Should child tax credits be expanded, or should conservatives back across-the-board tax relief? Should conservatives support domestic drilling or find ways to incentivize alternative energy consumption? These discussions revolved around two more foundational questions. Can small-government policies win popular support? Should conservatives use government to protect and enhance family life and

the free market? The idea that both answers may be “no” never troubled a panelist.

The other point of contention between “traditionalists” and “reformers” is stylistic and cultural. David Frum wrote in Canada’s *National Post*, “The dominant wing in today’s GOP is the ‘say it louder’ wing.” This faction is unabashedly populist in tone and prides itself on speaking to “real Americans.” Its influence buoyed the good-hearted but green Sarah Palin. But reformers like Frum balk at the anti-intellectual tone of a movement that promotes creation science and global-warming-denialism. They prefer competent and innovative governors like Minnesota’s Tim Pawlenty who have largely avoided confrontations in the culture war. Frum has argued that chasing after the growing segment of college-educated voters “will involve painful change, on issues ranging from the environment to abortion. And it will involve potentially even more painful changes of style and tone: toward a future that is less overtly religious, less negligent with policy, and less polarizing on social issues.”

But while conservatives discuss whether to moderate the party’s position on abortion or change its small government doctrine, there is one non-negotiable issue. The defining legacy of the Bush presidency and the primary cause of electoral disaster for Republicans was the Iraq War. But the war is the one thing the conservative movement

will not allow itself to question. *National Review* chose three Iraq War supporters for its panel on "The Coming Foreign Policy Debate." Moderator Rich Lowry introduced AEI's Frederick Kagan by stating that he "deserved a medal" for conceiving and promoting the surge strategy. There to "debate" him was the Jacksonian hawk, Andrew McCarthy, who has argued, "If we don't suppress Iran, Syria, the Taliban, al Qaeda, and the Sunni terror funding stream in Saudi Arabia, we can't win in Iraq." The token realist was Paul Saunders of the Nixon Center, who served as senior adviser to the undersecretary of state for global affairs in the Bush administration.

Saunders argued smartly that Americans do not pay enough attention "to the morality of foreign-policy outcomes" and credit themselves too much "for their good intentions when they do intervene." But he hesitated to question the wisdom of the Iraq War, only its execution: "We should think about what we did there after the invasion."

McCarthy, representing the most feverish war supporters, suggested that threats to American hegemony were less from without than within: "We have a fifth column in this country that is larger than we like to think," he sputtered. McCarthy defended the Bush doctrine as a practical guide to foreign policy, while partially blaming the setbacks in Iraq on "ingrate" Iraqis.

Instead of rethinking the scale of American military commitments in the face of limited resources, Kagan argued for vast increases in defense spending. To those who dissent from this line of argument he asked, "How did we get from 1929 to 1939?"

By avoiding tough questions about the Iraq War and by framing the debate as between "Say It Louder" populists and rational realists, the conservative movement avoids nearly all responsibil-

ity for the collapse of the Republican Party. Traditionalists can argue that they did not support Bush's spending and never loved McCain. Reformers will say that their innovative ideas were ignored and that they privately mocked Sarah Palin. Both sides can claim Reagan as their hero and not one cozy sinecure or generous foundation grant is in jeopardy. The debate about the future of conservatism is settled because no one is willing to risk harming the movement itself.

In the week leading up to the conference, *National Review Online* editor Kathryn Jean Lopez quoted the publisher's statement from the first issue of the magazine: "For we offer, besides ourselves, a position that has not grown old under the weight of a gigantic, parasitic bureaucracy, a position untempered by the doctoral dissertations of a generation of Ph.D's in social architecture, unattenuated by a thousand vulgar promises to a thousand different pressure groups, uncorroded by a cynical contempt for human freedom. And that, ladies and gentlemen, leaves us just about the hottest thing in town."

Lopez promised, "we will work to ensure that statement is always true." But it is not true. The conservative movement's position has grown moldy with the corruption of the Bush administration. The movement is weighed down not by doctoral dissertations but by think tanks that turn genuine conservative insights into propaganda. In the 50 years since that statement was written, the Right has developed its own interest groups. Liberal contempt for human freedom has been joined by conservative naïveté about human nature. Having grown as weary and attenuated as the midcentury establishment it sought to dethrone, the conservative movement is no longer about ideas but opportunism. Instead of offering a vision for the future, panelists proposed future candi-

dates: Bobby Jindal of Louisiana or Mark Sanford of South Carolina. In the meantime, the conservative movement is happy to allow Obama to set the terms of the discussion.

Kim Strassel announced, "The tax debate won't be all that hard in the Obama administration. He will unify us in opposition." Heather Mac Donald said it would be amusing to watch House Republicans rediscover their fiscal conservatism once a Democrat enters the Oval Office. Would they be accused of hypocrisy after their profligate record under Bush? "Yes," Mac Donald said, "but if you want fiscal conservatism, that is the price." Jonah Goldberg admitted that while he enjoyed intra-conservative debates, he expected that the Obama administration would do the work of unifying the movement for them.

He is probably right. Before 2006, nearly all pundits agreed that Democrats would have to learn to reach out to white evangelicals, moderate their positions on social issues, and temper their opposition to the Iraq War or they would face minority status forever. But Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi never attempted to reinvent liberalism. Neither did Obama. Bush's failures made it easy for Democrats to increase their majorities in Congress and take back the White House.

The conservative movement is also sustained by failures. It is too painful to uproot the think tanks and dismantle the direct-mail operations. It would be too incriminating to question the justice of the Iraq War. As long as Bush's incompetence can be written off as unique, the movement can avoid any serious re-examination of its beliefs or actions during his presidency. And if Obama stumbles while managing the two wars and collapsing economy Bush handed him, the movement stands to profit from those missteps as well. The ideas don't matter anymore. ■

Goldwater Standard

I sent my first paycheck as a bagboy at the A&P grocery store—\$19 and some odd cents—as a contribution to the Barry Goldwater campaign. That was the summer

of 1964, and I was just getting ready to start my senior year in high school.

That election produced a landslide for the Democrats and left Republicans outnumbered 295 to 140 in the United States House. Many pundits said then that the GOP had gone too far to the right. Several said the party was dead.

But two years later, we picked up 46 seats in the House, eight in the Senate, and six governorships, including Ronald Reagan in California. Seeds planted in the disastrous defeat of 1964 led to the Reagan presidency and what many have called the Conservative Revolution. The Republican Party grew when it offered a real alternative to the Democrats, not when it became a me-too party.

Fast forward to 1990. I will never forget a panicky, late night Republican conference meeting in the Cannon House Office Building. Ed Rollins was then head of the National Republican Congressional Committee. Polls showed that Republicans were going to pick up 20 to 30 seats in the House, but the first President Bush had abandoned his no new taxes pledge a few weeks before. Rollins told us the latest polls showed that Republican candidates had dropped 10 points almost overnight.

Candidates who had been ahead 60-40 were suddenly tied; those ahead 55-45 were behind. Rollins advised us to run as far away from the president as possible. Two days later, he was fired on orders from the White House. Congressional Republicans had voted 105-71 against the tax increase, withstanding tremendous lobbying by the president and his cabinet. Still, we lost 10 seats.

By early 1992, the economy had slowed drastically, but the president spent most of his State of the Union speech talking about success in Iraq. My brother called later and told me every bartender in America probably changed channels after the first few minutes. The first President Bush, by increasing taxes and seeming to care more about people in other countries than people in the U.S., gave us Bill Clinton.

He in turn gave Republicans the majority in Congress in 1994, which we have now squandered thanks largely to the second President Bush, who launched an unnecessary war in Iraq and produced record deficits. Unbelievably, he allowed the Democrats to claim the mantle of fiscal conservatism and made way for the most far-left president in American history in Barack Obama. My father told me many years ago that your friends can do you much more harm than your enemies.

A Republican House member from Kentucky told me a few months before the election, “The president is killing us.” A few days after the election, a Republican member from New York told me, “The president killed us.”

It got so bad that no member of the House or Senate in any tight race wanted the president—described on one national television program as “the invisible man of the campaign”—to join him on the stump. He spent the last weekend hidden away at Camp David.

Now everyone is giving advice and discussing the future of the Grand Old Party. Some liberal pundits are saying that if the Republicans do not become

more “inclusive”—which is to say, more like the Democrats—the party will be relegated to the dustbin of history.

Where do we go from here? Well, Senator Obama won by masking his left-wing views and in some respects running an America First campaign. He advocated tax breaks for companies that create jobs in the United States. He said the \$12 billion a month being spent in Iraq should be spent on people in whichever state he was campaigning.

But we cannot out-promise President-elect Obama. Our only hope is a return to traditional conservatism—not a luke-warm conservatism, but that of Pat Buchanan, Russell Kirk, Phyllis Schlafly, and Barry Goldwater. William Buckley, before he passed away, was strongly opposed to our misadventure in Iraq, much to the embarrassment of *National Review* and the neocons.

We need to ignore advice from self-serving “big government conservatives” such as Bill Kristol, who once said he could work just as well with liberal Democrats. We need to show how big-government policies have driven up the cost of medical care and college tuition, housing and energy. Too much government always results in very few at the top and very many at the bottom. About the only thing big government is good at is wiping out the middle class.

True conservatism lifts all boats. The wealthy come out alright under almost any system. Everyone, especially those at the bottom economically, come out better under small-government conservatism.

That’s a case we can win—if only Republicans will remember their conservative roots. ■

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