

# Hope & Fear

Democratic dominance is not the end of the world.

By W. James Antle III

BY THE END OF THE YEAR, the federal government may have totally restructured the American healthcare system. This health-insurance industry takeover may lead to widespread taxpayer subsidies for elective abortion. A new national energy tax may be imposed to reduce carbon emissions. The secret ballot for union organization may be effectively eliminated, swelling Big Labor's ranks and coffers. Or maybe none of these things will have happened.

Hard as it may be to believe, that last prospect looks most likely. It is a real possibility that none of these major legislative items—all considered inevitable after the Democratic victories of 2006 and 2008—will be enacted by the end of year, or will they pass only in attenuated form. The election of Barack Obama and his party's congressional supermajorities was supposed to signal that change had come. A year later, very little has changed.

This is no doubt disappointing to many of Obama's supporters, for whom the biggest change might be watching their audacious hopes harden into cynicism. The administration's inability to fulfill the wildest dreams of the Left is enraging many of the squabbling interest groups that comprise the Democratic Party, from pro-choice feminists, who balked at the anti-abortion Stupak amendment that was necessary to ram a healthcare bill through the House, to gay-rights groups, who have been told that their status in their party's coalition remains "don't ask, don't tell." But the persistence of the status quo should also

be disillusioning for another group: conservatives who believe that the Republic cannot survive Republican electoral setbacks.

To hear that great red-state prophet Sean Hannity tell it, America stands at the precipice of socialism. But virtually all the socialism now stalking the land—bailouts for the automobile industry, the banks, homeowners, and various other politically favored groups—began under the Bush administration. So did the tidal wave of red ink ready to break over taxpayers' heads. In eight short years, a budget surplus of \$127 billion gave way to a \$1.2 trillion deficit. A big new entitlement was created that added at least \$8 trillion to Medicare's unfunded liabilities, compounding a \$50 trillion shortfall that dwarfs our official national debt and threatens to bankrupt the country.

President Obama and his congressional allies have, of course, made all of these problems worse. Confronted with the Bush administration's overspending, they passed out taxpayer dollars with an even more generous hand. Faced with rising deficits, they borrowed even more money, starting with a \$787 billion stimulus plan that stimulated little besides a retro industry of Keynesian economists. Nobody in Obama's inner circle seems to question whether federal bureaucrats with no experience building cars should really be running General Motors.

But in one significant way, Obama has made things better: when George W. Bush was piling up deficits, growing the federal government, creating new entitlements, and signing sundry stimulus

packages or bailouts, Hannitized conservatives muted their criticism. Worse, they were often Big Government's biggest cheerleaders. Now that Obama is in power, the country's spokesmen for limited government are finally doing their jobs. When the Democrats try to borrow, spend, regulate, and inflate America into oblivion, conservatives are full-throated in their opposition. It wasn't until Obama took office that concerned citizens began holding Tea Parties—at which Sean Hannity is ubiquitous—loudly protesting the direction in which our masters in Washington are taking the country.

To some extent, all the fuss is inversely proportional to anything the Obama administration has actually been able to do. It is reminiscent of the Right's decade of anger at Bill Clinton, who ultimately failed at all his biggest liberal policy initiatives and instead ended up negotiating balanced budgets with a Republican Congress. This modest legacy—and the Big Government conservatism that came afterward—led to a partial reappraisal of Clinton's record from some of his most fervent critics, including conservative publisher Christopher Ruddy and financier Richard Mellon Scaife. In 2007, *Newsmax's* Ruddy was quoted as saying to the *New York Times*, "Both of us have had a rethinking. Clinton wasn't such a bad president. In fact, he was a pretty good president in a lot of ways, and Dick feels that way today."

In fairness, Bill Clinton became the president he was—relatively frugal fiscally, mostly inconsequential otherwise

—because conservatives opposed him so passionately. He had intended a federal-government takeover of health-care that was in some ways more brazen than anything Obama is likely to sign anytime soon. He had hoped to raise taxes by a greater amount, to emerge as a more consistent champion of abortion and gay rights, and to preside over a bigger, more activist federal government.

But even in the minority, conservatives managed to stop him. With Democrats still firmly in charge of the House and Senate, Clinton was defeated on healthcare, the energy tax, the stimulus bill, and gays in the military. He was also made to regret his victories on gun control and midnight basketball: in 1994, conservatives and Perot-voting independents banded together to throw Clinton's congressional enablers out of office. Judging from the strongly liberal direction he took while Democrats ran Capitol Hill, Clinton's presidency might have turned out very differently without a Republican Congress. Voters thought so: as Bob Dole was tanking in the national polls during the 1996 presidential campaign, congressional Republicans salvaged their young majorities by running ads asking, "Do you want to give Bill Clinton a blank check?"

Obama has yet to contend with divided government. Instead he has a theoretically filibuster-proof Democratic majority in the Senate and a 78-seat margin in the House. But the intensity and effectiveness of conservative opposition has made many congressional Democrats—who fear 1994-like conditions in the 2010 midterm elections—so wary of supporting the more controversial aspects of the president's agenda that his working majority is much smaller. Consider: House Speaker Nancy Pelosi would have never allowed the Stupak amendment, a stronger ban

on taxpayer funding of abortion than the Hyde amendment, to be added to the House healthcare bill if she'd had the votes—her chamber boasts a 59.3 percent Democratic majority—to pass the legislation otherwise.

Conservative activists have not needed a GOP majority in Congress to slow down, or even stop, Obama's agenda. Town hall uprisings and other protests that put pressure on Blue Dog Democrats have been enough. But trouble begins when the Tea Parties become GOP pep rallies, channeling conservative anger into support for unconservative causes and candidates. Under Obama, conservative activism has focused on limiting government. But there are many pundits and political strategists who would like to switch the focus to electing Republicans, reviving the blind party loyalty that led conservatives into the wilderness in the first place.

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That was notoriously what happened in the special election for New York's 23rd congressional district, where the GOP establishment nominated a liberal candidate in the apparent belief that conservatives would have no place else to go. The National Republican Senatorial Committee has also handpicked moderates or candidates whose conservative credentials are unknown to run in several crucial 2010 Senate races: Mark Kirk in Illinois, Michael Castle in Delaware, Charlie Crist in Florida, Rob Simmons in Connecticut, Trey Grayson in Kentucky, and Carly Fiorina in California. (The NRSC has backed off Simmons a bit because former World

Wrestling Entertainment CEO Linda McMahon has promised to finance her own campaign.) Conservatives will be asked to trudge dutifully to the polls to vote for candidates who either support Big Government policies in the Bush-Obama continuum—Kirk and Castle were two of the eight House Republicans to vote for cap and trade—or who remained silent as the massive bailouts commenced.

Some of these Republicans face conservative primary challengers with a legitimate shot at winning the general election. Others are the only GOP candidates with a realistic chance of winning next November because of their home states' bluish tinge. But here conservatives should learn from liberal disappointment with the Democrats: the reason the Democratic supermajorities have been so ineffectual is that they are too dependent on ideologically suspect members whose constituents' underly-

ing political sympathies are for the other party. Getting Democrats elected in Idaho, Virginia, Mississippi, and Arkansas may be good for making Nancy Pelosi speaker and Harry Reid Senate majority leader. It is not necessarily the best path to enacting the Democratic agenda.

But national Republican leaders are headed down the same path—they seek to pad their congressional numbers by electing candidates who will regularly vote against their party on controversial issues, whether because of their own political moderation or their Obama-supporting constituents' demands. This strategy makes some sense in the

## DEEP BACKGROUND

### **CIA trainers report that the Agency is having trouble figuring out what to do with all the new officers acquired during the Bush administration's Global War on Terror.**

Agency budgets ballooned in the wake of 9/11, and there was pressure from the White House to increase manpower dramatically. Career Trainee classes, the CIA's equivalent of the military's Officer Candidate Schools, went from an intake of about 100 a year to more than 1,000 in 2002-03. As the numbers went up, the quality of the training went down, particularly as a no-fail system was adopted. The influx of new officers, increasing the size of the Agency from 12,000 to 20,000 over the course of two years, created a demographic problem. The average experience level of CIA officers has dropped to eight years due to resignations or retirements to take lucrative contractor positions. This means that many of the officers instructing new hires at the principal training center near Williamsburg, Virginia lack background. And few of the new officers bring with them qualifications such as foreign-language skills and experience abroad. Many don't have a clue what it's like to live and work in a foreign environment and suffer severe cultural shock if they do go overseas. Most are assigned to the burgeoning number of offices in the United States while those sent to the huge stations in Iraq and Afghanistan are often bored and frustrated, confined to their offices because of security concerns. Many have quit as a result.



### **The Obama administration is considering cybersecurity legislation that will enable the government to close down the Internet in the event of a national emergency.**

Of course, government would have the power to decide what constitutes an emergency. Existing technology already allows for real-time monitoring of many activities that most Americans would regard as constitutionally protected. Telecommunications companies retain detailed records of customer activities. Some Internet providers record every single action taken, including individual keystrokes. In Britain, a new law, with the wonderfully euphemistic title, Intercept Modernization Program—part of the equally splendid Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act—will soon go into effect. It will require telecommunications providers to collect and retain all information on subscribers' activities for a period of six months. Employees of 653 public agencies, most of which have no law-enforcement or intelligence function, can access the information with no judicial oversight. In the United States, such records are maintained in a haphazard fashion by the various service providers, but they can be accessed by the Justice Department through the issuance of a national security letter, which has no judicial review and includes legal penalties for anyone who even discloses that he has received one. More than 35,000 were issued last year. In a recent case in Philadelphia, an Internet service provider was asked for detailed information relating to all traffic on a certain date, to include IP addresses, times, e-mail addresses, physical addresses, registered accounts, Social Security Numbers, bank account numbers, and credit card numbers.

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Senate, where party-line procedural votes tend to matter more and the filibuster power is on the line. In the House, it makes no difference whether there are 178 votes for John Boehner for speaker or 177. As of now, conservatives can only prevail on a handful of issues in the House, and if a Republican is not willing to take the right side in those fights, the grassroots should be just as pleased to see his seat fall to a Democrat.

There are encouraging signs that conservatives are beginning to understand how they have been used by the GOP. In NY-23, they disregarded all the usual warnings that they sky would fall if a Democrat won an election and supported a conservative third-party candidate over a liberal Republican. That third-party candidate, Doug Hoffman, was hardly ideal—he had no real knowledge of the district he was running to represent—but he forced the liberal Republican from the race and nearly won the seat. Elsewhere, pro-bailout Republicans are routinely booed at Tea Party events.

The Tea Party movement will accomplish nothing if it becomes an appendage of the Republican Party in much the same way that the antiwar movement became annexed to the Democratic Party. It's a truism among veteran conservatives: the GOP is better in opposition than in power. Few activists on the Right follow that reasoning to its logical conclusion, however—that putting Republicans back in control might not be an improvement over a hamstrung Democratic majority. Conservatives should fight Washington's overreach no matter which party is in power, rather than being distracted from their principles by nightmare scenarios of Democratic dominance or sweet promises of Republican utopias. ■

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