

WHY WE'RE LOSING

By the final months of the Bush presidency, nearly two-thirds of Americans had concluded that the Iraq war was a mistake. Almost three-quarters believed that the country was on the “wrong track,” an astonishingly bad number for a nonrecession year.

Large majorities of Americans preferred Democrats to Republicans on virtually every public policy issue. Americans regarded Democrats as more competent by a margin of 5 to 3, more ethical by a margin of 2 to 1. They credited Democrats as caring more about “people like them.” Americans even preferred Democrats on taxes.

On the day they reelected President Bush in 2004, equal numbers of Americans identified themselves as Republicans and Democrats. By 2007, Democrats outnumbered Republicans 3 to 2. The generation of Americans that turned twenty between 2000 and 2005 identified with the Democrats by the largest majority recorded for any age cohort since modern polling began after World War II.

Since 2003, the once formidable Republican advantage in fundraising has collapsed. Democratic Internet sites draw more traffic

and more enthusiasm than anything Republicans or conservatives can offer. Republicans are dispirited and demobilized; Democrats, united and galvanized.

Republicans offered Americans an array of capable and experienced candidates in the 2008 presidential cycle; Democrats, two neophytes and a former first lady. Yet as the 2008 election cycle commenced, almost every one of these miserably weak Democrats beat almost every one of these impressive Republicans in head-to-head poll matchups.

Conservatives were brought to power in the 1970s and 1980s by liberal failure. Now conservative failure threatens to inaugurate a new era of liberalism. Rather than take the measure of our troubles, however, we are denying them. Rather than adapting to new times, we are indulging ourselves in nostalgia for past successes.

Ronald Reagan campaigned in 1980 on a promise to cut income-tax rates. He won decisively. Since then, two other Republicans have campaigned on a similar promise: Bob Dole in 1996 and George W. Bush in 2000. In both elections, polls consistently indicated that the public preferred deficit reduction to tax cuts. Republicans simply refused to believe it. One leading consultant told me in 1996 that no matter what people said about tax cuts, they would always vote for them: “We’re leaving a wrapped candy bar in the privacy of the polling booth—and when the voter steps out, there will be an empty wrapper on the floor.” It did not happen that way, and for reasons that could have been predicted.

When Republicans speak of “tax cuts,” they mean “income tax cuts.” Yet after almost three decades of income-tax cutting, most Americans no longer pay very much income tax. In fact, four out of five taxpayers now pay more in payroll taxes than federal income taxes. Some 29 million income-earning American households pay no income tax at all.¹ By contrast, the notorious top 1 percent of taxpayers pay well over one-third of all U.S. income taxes. The top

1 percent may make a disproportionate amount of money. But they still cast only 1 percent of the votes.

Conservative success has likewise retired the crime issue. In the single year 1974, one out of every three American families suffered a serious crime. Victimized and frightened, voters rated crime the single most important issue facing the country. Between 1990 and 2000, the American crime rate plunged—and by 2006, crime had dropped to ninth place on the Harris poll's list of public concerns, after terrorism/national security, the economy/jobs, energy prices, health care, education, the environment, Social Security, and poverty.²

Hmm, how about inflation? Americans grumble about the cost of living. It showed up in many polls as an important issue in 2005. But inflation in the 1970s sense—a general increase in the price level—has dwindled almost to nothing. The cost increases Americans struggle with today trace either to swings in the price of highly variable commodities (oil, gas, food) or else to a few key markets badly distorted by government subsidy and intervention (housing, health care, and college tuition). In either case, however, the monetarist policies used to halt the inflation of the 1970s can do little to help.

Public disgust with welfare drove voters to the GOP in 1994. Welfare costs are now rising again. This time, it is Republicans, not Democrats, who are responsible. In 2001, President Bush and the Republican Congress restored immigrant eligibility for social welfare programs. Over the next five years, enrollment in the food stamp program alone jumped by 9 million people.³

It's not just the issues that have changed. The country is changing, and in ways deeply inhospitable to the Republican Party.

The Republicans draw their strength from white America, the Democrats from nonwhite America. European Americans are rapidly dwindling: from 80 percent of the population in 1980 to 70 percent

in 2000, and then (if current trends continue) to probably a hair over 60 percent by 2020.

Married women vote Republican, unmarried women vote Democratic. The number of women who had not married by their late thirties doubled between 1980 and 2000.

Parents vote Republican, the childless vote Democratic. Between 1980 and 2000, the number of women who had not given birth by age forty also doubled.

Churchgoers vote Republican, the secular vote Democratic. While church attendance is notoriously difficult to measure, it does seem to have declined sharply since 1970: By 2000, probably at least one-quarter of Americans rarely or never attended church. Almost 15 percent of Americans describe themselves as “without religion.”⁴

The moderately educated vote Republican, while both the highly educated and the uneducated vote Democratic. Between 1980 and 2000, the proportion of Americans with graduate degrees shot up from too few for the Census Bureau to count to almost 9 percent of the population. Meanwhile, barely half of the rapidly growing minority population is graduating from high school.⁵

Where you see a white, married, middle-class, middle-aged church-going family with children there you probably behold Republican voters. Where church attendance is high and military vocations are popular, Republicans are strong. If you finished college but not graduate school, if you earn more than \$75,000 but less than \$200,000, you probably belong to the great Republican middle. The more emphatically you agree that people who work hard can get ahead; that the rules are basically fair; that you are “extremely proud” to be an American—the more likely you are to vote for the Grand Old Party.

And it is precisely this great American middle that is shrinking before our eyes.

After the disturbing elections of 1996 and 2000, the great political observer Michael Barone tried to cheer up Republicans by pointing out that Red State America had more children than Blue State America. Conservatives might be ceasing to outvote liberals—but they were at least outbreeding them! Similarly, Phillip Longman, a liberal writer interested in demography, worried after the 2004 election that the average fertility rate in states that voted for George Bush was more than 11 percent higher than the rate in states that voted for John Kerry.⁶

But this is the very opposite of good news for Republicans. The reason that the red states have so many more children than the blue states is that they have so many more Hispanic immigrants. And those increasing Hispanic populations will slowly but surely push red states into the blue column.

Look at California, once a Republican bastion. California voted for Nixon over Kennedy in 1960 and Ford over Carter in 1976. Since 2000, California has become a majority-minority state—and a Democratic bastion. As things are going, Florida, Colorado, and even Texas will likely follow.

Texas tipped majority-minority in 2006. As yet, very few Texas Hispanics have acquired the right to vote. One-third of Texas Hispanics are noncitizens. Almost half of Texas's citizen Hispanics are younger than age eighteen, so they cannot vote either. If those noncitizens are legalized and naturalized—when those under-eighteens grow up—Texas will likely trend Democratic.

Many of us on the right would like to believe that Republicans got into trouble by abandoning conservative principle. I'd like to believe it myself. The evidence, unfortunately, does not support that view. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that a more consistent, more principled, more conservative administration would have been even more soundly rejected by the public than the unpopular Bush administration ever was:

- Conservatives worry that Bush spent too much and cut taxes too little. But most Americans wanted the federal government to spend more rather than tax less. By margins of more than 5 to 4, Americans condemn the Bush tax cuts as “not worth it.”⁷ When offered a clear choice between cutting taxes or balancing the budget during election year 2004, Americans opted for budget balancing by a margin of 2 to 1. When the choice was changed to cutting taxes or increasing spending, they opted for higher spending by a margin of 5 to 4.⁸ During the second Clinton term, more than 60 percent of Americans complained that their personal tax burden was “too high.” Since 2001, that figure has dropped below 50 percent.⁹
- Conservatives (me too) condemned Bush for adding a prescription drug benefit to Medicare without obtaining cost-cutting reforms in return. But public support for the benefit ranged between 80 percent and 90 percent through the first Bush term.¹⁰ Even when warned that the benefit might cost more than \$400 billion over the next decade, support diminished only slightly, to about 75 percent.¹¹ Had Bush heeded conservative advice on this issue, he would very likely have lost the 2004 election.
- Conservatives dislike Bush’s No Child Left Behind education reforms. We would have preferred reforms that promoted school choice, held failing schools to account, and reduced federal education spending. A misguided public firmly rejects all these conservative views. When asked, “Should we close poorly performing schools?” 77 percent of Americans said “no.” When asked, what should be done instead with these bad schools, 77 percent of Americans answer: Give them more money. What about firing bad principals or teachers? Americans support that idea, but by surprisingly narrow margins: 56–40. Consistently, between 60 percent and 70 percent of Americans reject the idea of shifting from the existing public school system to some new alternative.¹²

- Conservatives favor a muscular approach to terrorism and quietly worry that the second-term George Bush has been too weak. Most Americans, however, take an increasingly skeptical view of military action. Between 2002 and 2006, the proportion of Americans who thought military force could reduce the risk of terrorism dropped by 16 points, from 48 percent to 32 percent.¹³
- Conservatives staunchly backed President Bush's bold stance against federal aid to embryo-killing stem-cell research. Yet a consistent majority of Americans surveyed opposes the president's stand, even when the poll question carefully explains that this research destroys potential human life.¹⁴
- Many conservative constitutionalists resent President Bush's decision to sign the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform, despite the president's own previously expressed opinion that the bill violated the Constitution. Few Americans—under 10 percent—take any serious interest in campaign-finance reform, and so a veto would probably have been politically cost-free. On the other hand, the preferred conservative reform—lift campaign limits so long as the source of the money is disclosed—is opposed by more than 75 percent of Americans.¹⁵

On issues from Social Security to health care to environmental protection, conservatives find themselves on the less popular side of the great issues of the day. That does not mean that conservatives are wrong. But it does mean that we are likely to lose if we continue repeating old formulas without adapting them to new times.

The last of the New Deal politicians, House Speaker Tip O'Neill, used to complain bitterly about the ingratitude of the American voter. The Democrats, O'Neill said, had created the American middle class—and now that middle class was voting Republican. It seems never to have occurred to O'Neill that a prosperous middle-class

nation might need or want different policies from the Depression-battered society in which he grew up. As O'Neill saw it, what was right for 1937 was just what was required in 1977.

Are we conservatives and Republicans repeating O'Neill's mistake?

In the Republican debates of 2007, candidate after candidate invoked the name and memory of Ronald Reagan. I wish a candidate had said: Ronald Reagan was a good man and a great president. What made him great was his ability to respond to the demands of his times. We must respond to the demands of ours.

When Ronald Reagan ran for president against Gerald Ford in 1976, the federal government set the price of oil and natural gas. It regulated airfares, truck routes, and train schedules. It controlled the interest rate paid on checking accounts and the fees charged by stockbrokers. It had only just recently legalized the private ownership of gold. It decided who was—and who was not—allowed to broadcast on radio and television, and it closely monitored the format and content of what they said. Federal judges ran school districts, busing children hither and yon in pursuit of racial balance. The marginal income-tax rate for a typical middle-class family of four almost doubled between 1968 and 1980, even as that family's standard of living stagnated or declined.

In such a world, Ronald Reagan's promises to restore freedom by curtailing government powerfully resonated.

Between 1968 and 1980, the United States suffered a series of serious geopolitical defeats. It lost a war in Indochina and endured an oil boycott by OPEC. Soviet-backed insurgents seized power in Central America. America's most important ally in the Persian Gulf, the Shah of Iran, was toppled by revolution. The Soviet nuclear arsenal equaled and exceeded that of the United States, and Soviet-supported terrorist movements waged war against the governments of Italy, West Germany, Israel, and the United Kingdom. In 1979,

Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan, the first large Soviet deployment outside its accepted zone of influence since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Against such threats, Reagan's strength and optimism met the challenge of the times.

But now?

If there is anything that George Bush has not lacked, it is the spirit of optimism. He bet his presidency on a sequence of best-case scenarios, headed by the gamble that Iraq could be subdued with half the number of troops estimated by the Pentagon. Nor does America lack strength. The world's only superpower has never been stronger. What haunts Americans is doubt that the nation's strength has been used intelligently. It is more brains, not more brawn, that Americans want from their next administration.

And while many of the country's most pressing domestic problems can be traced to government—the health insurance problem is horribly aggravated by perverse tax incentives—few of them can be fixed by Reagan-style tax cutting and deregulation. The energy market is already mostly deregulated. Ditto the mortgage market. More generally, how many Americans in these opening years of the twenty-first century feel too little liberty to do what they want to do? When Ronald Reagan warned in 1964 against the anthill society of communism, he was warning against something vivid and real: The very next year, the world's most populous society would be plunged into a “cultural revolution” in which the society's leaders would try to extinguish human individuality by abolishing names and replacing them with numbers. When Reagan in that same great speech invoked the maximum of human liberty consistent with social order, he spoke at a time when order seemed abundant and liberty in short supply. The draft still existed in 1964. Today, our whole planet is seething with human dynamism—and the worries politicians hear on front steps are worries about disorder: illegal drugs, uncontrolled migration, and income volatility.

If Republican politicians quote Reagan, their political operatives study Nixon. It was Richard Nixon who discovered that middle-class Americans despised arrogant and permissive social elites much more than they resented wealthy economic elites. Republicans have been reprising Nixon's 1972 campaign against McGovern for a third of a century. As the excesses of the 1960s have dwindled into history, however, the 1972 campaign has worked less and less well. Four decades after Appomattox, even the Grand Old Party of Lincoln and Grant recognized that it could no longer win votes by waving the bloody shirt. FDR's party eventually accepted that nobody remembered Herbert Hoover anymore. How many more elections can conservatives win by campaigning against Abbie Hoffman and Bobby Seale?

Voters want solutions to the problems of today, and those are the solutions that today's conservatives have to invent and develop. There's a marvelous story from the 1950s about an ex-Communist who got into an argument with a young man newly infatuated with Marxism. The older man retorted: "Your answers are so old that I've forgotten the questions."

If we conservatives and Republicans want to win again, we have to offer the American voter something fresh and compelling—answers to the problems of today, not the problems of the era when disco ruled. Ronald Reagan was elected at a time when every social indicator seemed to be moving in the wrong direction. Ronald Reagan's optimism refreshed the country because so many Americans had lost hope in their society. Today, Americans worry less about their society than about the competence and effectiveness of their government. Our conservative and Republican failures have fed those worries.

In the heady days of 1994, some conservatives joked about shrinking government to a size small enough to drown in a bathtub. That did not sound so amusing after we witnessed New Orleans drowned

in a hurricane. There are things only government can do, and if we conservatives wish to be entrusted with the management of the government, we must prove that we care enough about government to manage it well.

The most dangerous legacy Reagan bequeathed his party was his legacy of cheerful indifference to detail. Yes, it worked for him. It worked for John F. Kennedy to run the presidency buzzed on painkillers. Kennedy's ability to beat the odds is not a model to be emulated, and neither is Reagan's. The next Republican president needs to master details, understand his options, and make his decisions with care.

Americans are asking new questions. Conservatives who aspire to govern America had better provide new answers.

