



Republican Recovery

AEI scholars have been examining the Republicans' electoral defeat and what the party can do to regain its electoral footing. Henry Olsen says Republicans and conservatives must hew to eternal principles while making them attractive in a changing world. David Frum warns the GOP not to be overly optimistic about the coming midterm, a time when the out-party usually gains seats, and instead to face the electoral arithmetic and figure out a way to expand the base. Sam Tanenhaus of The New York Times Book Review addressed the future of conservatism in a 2007 Bradley Lecture, suggesting that there is hope in a reform-minded conservative movement that holds the optimistic values of this country close to its core.

What Would Reagan Do?

By Henry Olsen

Ideas have consequences; so do elections. The debacle on November 4 will cause much soul-searching among both conservatives and Republicans and intensify the ongoing debate over the future course of the party and the movement.

Party leaders and movement activists will seek to answer one fundamental question: can a party built upon conservative principles constitute a governing majority in modern America? As they try to answer this question, they ought to do so in light of the answer to another: what would Reagan do?

This is not the first time that conservatives and Republicans have stared into an electoral abyss. Barry Goldwater's 1964 defeat was crushing and came at a time when the liberal Republicans who had so recently been unseated from party leadership were numerous and powerful. Most political observers thought that conservatism had been rejected for all time and that a Republican future lay in becoming a centrist party only slightly to the right of Great Society Democrats.

Ronald Reagan did not agree. In a trenchant column penned in the December 1, 1964, issue of *National Review*, he argued that Americans had rejected only a false vision of conservatism as a

radical departure from the status quo. He thought that conservatives had only "lost a battle in the continuing war for freedom" and that voters would rally to the conservative banner once they realized that Democratic liberals were the true radicals.

This article is striking for what was said and what was unsaid. Reagan implicitly referenced a conservative principle in speaking of the "war for freedom," but he did not mention a single specific conservative policy. Rather, he defended conservatism's salience by arguing that "we represent the forgotten American—that simple soul who goes to work, bucks for a raise, takes out insurance, pays for his kids' schooling, contributes to his church and charity and knows there just 'ain't no such thing as a free lunch.'"

This remarkable piece thus succinctly established the argument and audience for what would become Reaganite conservatism. This conservatism would succeed by pointing out how liberal values diverged from the American consensus, and those who would join the conservative movement would be average Americans—the Reagan Democrats. It is only a short distance from these words, penned in abject defeat in 1964, to the triumphs of 1984, 1994, and 2004.

It also established conservatism as a movement dedicated to a principle, rather than one married to a specific agenda. That principle, the sanctity and utility of human freedom, would be fixed, but it would be interpreted and applied in light of specific circumstances and in ways to persuade “that simple soul” upon whose consent American political success rests.

That the completion was beheld at the conception did not mean the course was easy. Reagan frequently faltered in formulating the precise mix of rhetoric and policy that would maintain the core principle of American conservatism while making it relevant to American circumstance.

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But he was ultimately successful. The specific policies proposed and enacted during the Reagan presidency and subsequent years of conservative governance were often quite different from those proposed in Barry Goldwater’s *Conscience of a Conservative*, yet one can easily see the common intellectual thread connecting the beginning and the end of the current conservative era.

Our task as conservatives is no different from Reagan’s. We, too, face the task of taking an eternal principle and making it attractive in a changed world. In undertaking this labor, however, we must take care to avoid two temptations that follow from an incomplete understanding of Reagan’s statesmanship.

The first temptation asks us to reject the core principle of American conservatism on the assumption that

the forgotten American no longer believes in it. This brand of conservative revisionism holds that electoral defeat has followed from too much fidelity to the idea that freedom and free markets improve Americans’ lives and souls. Whether this conservatism is heroic or Hamiltonian, it posits that other principles—family, stability, nationalism—should take center stage if the Republican Party is to regain the allegiance of a majority.

The second temptation is restoration, and it rests upon the idea that conservatism was never rejected because it was never truly tried. It focuses on the many deviations from modern conservative dogma over the past decade and argues that if our political leaders had remained true to our platform, all would have been well. Restorationists confuse policies with principles and often overlook the fact that our principles can flourish only if they resonate with average Americans who deal with concrete problems and who are resistant to radical change.

I do not know what the future will bring for American conservatism, but I do know that a conservatism that abandons freedom as its core principle is not distinctively American, and a conservatism that ignores reality will not win.

The road ahead of us will not be easy. There will be many false starts and blind alleys. Political entrepreneurs will compete for our allegiance; like start-up businesses, most will ultimately fail.

But we conservatives will come back. We will do so by neither rejecting nor restoring conservatism, but rather by renewing it. And in renewing conservatism, we will renew America.

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A New Path for the GOP

By David Frum

In the wake of the bruising result on Election Day, the Republican Party faces an excruciating and divisive choice between two very different futures. The first is the choice on display at the excited rallies that cheered Governor Sarah Palin all through the fall. This is a choice to fall back on the core base of the party. The base is almost entirely white, almost entirely resident in the middle of the country, moderately affluent, middle-aged and older, more male than female, with

some college education but not a college degree. Think of Joe the Plumber, and you see the core of the Republican Party.

Republicans have won a string of elections thanks to Joe. He came through in 1994, delivering both houses of Congress to the Republicans. Joe was not enough to elect Senator Bob Dole (R-Kans.) president, but thanks to him, the Republicans kept a dwindling hold on Congress in 1996, 1998, and 2000.

Joe rallied to President George W. Bush after September 11. Republicans owe their gains in 2002 to Joe. And without Joe, Bush would not have won in 2004.

Joe has not changed much over the past two decades or so. But the country has. The Hispanic population has almost doubled since 1990. The proportion of white Americans with a college degree has jumped from 22 percent in 1990 to almost 28.5 percent today.

To stay competitive, the GOP has had to win more and more of the Joe vote. Ruy Teixeira, perhaps America's leading expert on the voting behavior of the white working class, observed that Bush won in 2004 by only three points—but won the white working class by twenty-three points.

Joe the Plumber is no longer enough.
God bless him, he is the GOP base,
and no Republican wants to lose him.
But he needs reinforcements.

This year, an economically squeezed Joe did not come through for the GOP. But once the dust settles, many Republican leaders will urge the party to return to the tried and true. They will say, “2008 was an unusual year. Iraq, Bush, Katrina, the financial meltdown, and a too-moderate candidate at the head of the ticket—no wonder we lost. But the messages that won for Reagan in 1980 and Newt Gingrich in 1994 and Bush in 2002 will win for us again. Taxes, guns, right to life, patriotism—the formula is all there. Stick to it. And if 60 percent of the Joe vote is no longer enough, nominate Palin—and win 65 percent. Or 70 percent. Whatever it takes.”

As I said, that is one path. But there is another. It is the path that begins by facing up to the arithmetic that says Joe is no longer enough. God bless him, he is the GOP base, and no Republican wants to lose him. But he needs reinforcements.

Bush tried to reinforce Joe by appealing to Hispanic voters. But that approach failed, and for predictable reasons: American Hispanics are poor—and they vote

majority Democrat for the same reasons that poor people of all races vote Democratic. Bush hoped that he could win Hispanics by (A) granting amnesty to illegal immigrants, by (B) expanding federal programs like Medicare and federal education aid, and by (C) pressuring banks to relax lending standards to help lower-income workers to buy homes.

But Bush could not get (A) through Congress (and anyway it alienated Joe, whom Republicans still needed); he did (B), but Democrats outbid him, as they always will; and as for (C), well, we all know how that ended. If Hispanics benefitted disproportionately from the U.S. housing boom—as the early data suggest they did—they are suffering disproportionately from the U.S. housing bust.

There will not be a Hispanic future for the GOP for years and years. But there is another way to reinforce Joe—a way that is so old and dusty that it almost feels new and unexplored.

A generation ago, Republicans dominated among college graduates. In 1984 and 1988, Reagan and George H. W. Bush won states like California, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut—states that have been “blue” for a generation.

Those days are long gone. Since 1988, Democrats have become more conservative on economics—and Republicans have become more conservative on social issues.

College-educated Americans have come to believe that their money is safe with Democrats—but that their values are under threat from Republicans. And there are more and more of these college-educated Americans all the time.

So the question for the GOP is: will it pursue them? To do so will involve painful change, on issues ranging from the environment to abortion. And it will potentially involve 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. That is a future that leaves little room for Palin—but it is the only hope for a Republican recovery.

David Frum is a resident fellow at AEI. A version of this article appeared in Canada's *National Post* on November 5, 2008.

The GOP Will Get Sicker before It Gets Better

By David Frum

Karl Rove offered comforting words to grieving Republicans in an article published in the *Wall Street Journal* on November 13: "History will favor Republicans in 2010. Since World War II, the out-party has gained an average of 23 seats in the U.S. House and two in the U.S. Senate in a new president's first mid-term election. Other than FDR and George W. Bush, no president has gained seats in his first mid-term election in both chambers."

Conservatives can only hope so. Early indications, however, point ominously the other way. Like the economy, the Republican Party will most likely get sicker before it gets better. There are at least four reasons to think Karl Rove overoptimistic.

First, while the political cycle may favor Republicans, the business cycle now favors the Democrats. The U.S. economy has visibly slumped into recession on Bush's watch. If the economy recovers by 2010, the Democrats are well placed to claim credit. If problems linger, however, they are almost as well placed to escape blame. The *Wall Street Journal* may describe Wall Street's weakness as "the Barack market." Eventually, that description will gain force. For many months to come, however, Barack Obama can safely argue—as Ronald Reagan argued twelve months into his first term—that the economy's troubles were inherited from an unpopular predecessor.

Second, it is true that Reagan's party lost votes in its first midyear election, 1982. But Reagan's stringent anti-inflation program imposed short-term pain for long-term gain. In Obama's program, by contrast, the pain is all long term. In the short term, he offers a big increase in government spending, cash rebates, and wider health coverage. That is short-term gain for long-term pain. It seems unlikely that very much of that long-term pain will have arrived by 2010.

Third, the U.S. electoral map offers more opportunities for Democrats in 2010 than for Republicans. In 2010, the Democrats will be defending fifteen Senate seats to the Republicans' eighteen. No more than three of the Democratic seats look vulnerable (including Ken Salazar's in Colorado and—less so—Blanche Lincoln's

in Arkansas). There is also talk of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger challenging Senator Barbara Boxer in California, but he would have to endure a nasty primary fight first, with no guarantee of success.

By contrast, at least four Republican Senate seats look vulnerable: Ohio, struggling with a manufacturing downturn; Florida, where incumbent Mel Martinez won only 49 percent of the vote in the strong Republican year of 2004; and Louisiana, where first-term Senator David Vitter is suffering the aftereffects of the "D.C. madam" sex scandal.

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question is: how long will it take them?

Finally perhaps the strongest reason for doubting Republican chances in 2010 is the collapsed intellectual state of the party. Parties revive when they have something to say—some message relevant to the lives of actual voters. The party offered no such message in 2008, and there are no signs it will develop such a message soon.

The dominant wing in today's GOP is the "say it louder" wing. Rush Limbaugh tells his radio audience that the way to win in 2010 is by returning to the template of 1994 and 1980—campaigns fifteen and thirty years in the past! It would be as if the Democrats had responded to Ronald Reagan by returning to the good old themes of Lyndon Johnson and Adlai Stevenson. (Which, come to think of it, they did—with dismal results.)

Defeated parties do recover in time. The Republicans will find a new voice and a new way forward. The practical question is: how long will it take them? Those who promise that the Republican recovery can be accomplished quickly, easily, and without substantial reform only prolong the coming tour through the wilderness.

David Frum is a resident fellow at AEI. A version of this article appeared in Canada's *National Post* on November 15, 2008.

The Future of Conservatism

By Sam Tanenhaus

The difference between liberalism and conservatism in America is there is no such thing as a liberal movement. There is a conservative movement, and there are two strains of conservatism. One strikes me as recuperative, and it says, “If we can adjust to the prevailing liberalism of the moment, we can make it serve our purposes.” The other seems to me revanchist, and it essentially says, “Something has been taken from us, and we have to get it back.” That is the harder-edged conservatism that seems almost constantly at war with the more adaptive conservatism. And it is complicated, because it is not as if they are two different camps that war with one another, although I think sometimes that happens. Often what you see is a mix of the two, sometimes within a single figure.

When we come to the question of what conservatism will look like after George W. Bush, my sense is conservatism now is actually stronger than liberalism was in Lyndon Johnson’s last years. Not necessarily more popular ideologically—one of the curiosities of modern politics is that much of conservative ideology is not widely popular. It is supported on the strength of the president’s own appeal. This was true for Ronald Reagan. It was true, while it lasted, for George Bush.

I am trying to figure out if in this next phase we will have a kind of adaptive, recuperative conservatism, which I think is possible. Will we see a conservatism that follows the prescriptions of writers like Irving Kristol and George Will? Bush did, to some extent, say that we need a conservative welfare state—a conservative analogy to the welfare state. Or will we have the harder revanchist conservatism, which actually tries to roll back the politics of the welfare state?



I wanted to find a moment when conservatism was at its peak. There are different ways to read this. In movement terms, there was of course Barry Goldwater’s campaign in 1964; for a later generation, Reagan’s campaign in 1976, when he challenged Gerald Ford; or, of course, the Reagan years themselves. I am more interested in the tonalities and atmosphere of politics—the ideas in politics that filter out into the culture at large. So I found myself thinking, oddly enough, of the year 1970. Here are some of the books that were published that year: Tom Wolfe’s *Radical Chic*; Garry Wills’s *Nixon Agonistes*; Whittaker Chambers’s *Odyssey of a Friend*, his letters to William F.

Buckley; Saul Bellows’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, which I think is the one great neoconservative novel we have seen—and there was a fascinating issue of *The Public Interest* with a brilliant essay by Daniel Bell called “The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism,” which he later published as a book in 1976, and a very lyrical introductory essay by Irving Kristol.

In his essay, Kristol looks at the state of the culture, the political and social moment. He is fascinated by the student left, the student radicals. And he does not understand, as so many did not, why they should be so fiercely anti-American and claim that the United States does not offer freedom, protection, liberties, and opportunities, and yet be enchanted by Castro’s Cuba. The normal explanation of this, he says, is that these students are ignorant or hypocritical. But that is not good enough. He said we have to look beyond that, and he said maybe what lurks beneath the surface of all these protests is actually the yearning for a kind of authority, for higher spiritual values that the politics of the moment are not providing: “If our private and public worlds are ever again in our lifetimes to have a congenial relationship—if virtue is to regain her lost loveliness—then some such combination of the reforming spirit with the conservative ideal seems to me what is most desperately needed.”

So what I would suggest is that in this very fraught moment, with this election approaching, that is what we want in the next person we elect: not a revanchist who actually believes that the massive social structures we have built can be undone, but someone who will bring a kind of reform to them. And one of the interesting things about these various books I mentioned is that each of them is grappling with this question of the disillusionment among those who once invested their hopes and ideals in a “great society.”

If it recovers that sense of social, moral poise—not the language of accusation, not the language of “friends” and “enemies,” not the language of “leftists who share the same values as Osama bin Laden” and all the rest—if it is actually a kind of culturally textured, sophisticated critique of where the culture is, one that grows out of the optimistic values of this country, then I think there is a conservatism that can last another generation.

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