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Why Did Republicans Lose Their Appeal?

And how can they get it back?

by Victor Davis Hanson
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Colin Powell keeps insisting that the Republicans lost the presidency because of right-wing extremists like Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter, who, in his view, have become the public face of the Republican party, and thus will ensure its permanent marginalization.

Others argue that the Bush administration had allowed Republicanism to become a cowboyish clique of the selfish who wanted a free hand to make money and let others less fortunate be damned. David Frum offered the novel notion that Rush Limbaugh's girth, past drug use, checkered marital career, and palatial digs were emblematic of the party's out-of-touch self-indulgence, especially when contrasted with the athletic, happily married, and transracial Barack Obama.

But none of these explanations rings true — especially since most of the current critics themselves were, in the heyday of 2002–03, either enthusiastically working for, or writing in praise of, the very administration whose policies they now claim caused the present mess.

Limbaugh & Co.?

First, the real public expressions of extremism in American politics recently have *not* been from the Right — not surprisingly, perhaps, given that for much of this new century the Republicans smugly controlled most of the government.

It was not Rush Limbaugh, for example, but Michael Moore who announced that the 9/11 killers wrongly selected a blue-state city, or that the al-Qaeda insurgents were Minutemen-like patriots. Moore, remember, was no marginal figure but the darling of the Democratic establishment, who flocked to the gala opening of his crude propaganda film *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

Indeed, if one were to follow the logic of this new Powell doctrine that public expression of extremism sinks a party, then the Democrats would never have won back the Senate and the House. Senators as diverse as Dick Durbin, John Kerry, and Ted Kennedy shrilly compared American soldiers to terrorists, Nazis, Pol Pot's thugs, and Saddam's Baathists.

The most inflammatory public figure of the last two years was, in fact, Barack Obama's own minister, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who uttered vile racist characterizations of everyone from Italians to Jews, as part of his generic "G-d damning" of America. So far we have not seen a conservative version of Nicholson Baker's novel *Checkpoint*, or anything like Jonathan Chait's *New Republic* essay that began, "I hate President George W. Bush." Colin Powell himself has been demonized in scurrilous terms, but the epithets have come not from Rush Limbaugh, but rather from such observers as that old cultural icon of the Left, Harry Belafonte, who once quite unapologetically compared the secretary of state to a "house slave."

The Cycles of American Politics

There were historical reasons why it was unlikely that the Republicans were going to win the presidency

last year. It has always been difficult to extend a party's control of the executive branch for 12 consecutive years; the Democrats themselves had not done it since the Roosevelt-Truman years. In 30 out of the last 50 years, Republicans have controlled the White House, hardly proof of a conservative implosion. Over the last half-century, the general rule was that a Democrat could not win the presidency unless he had the cover of a Southern accent. That both JFK and Obama defied that conventional wisdom suggests that only the rare appearance of a charismatic youthful Democratic candidate can balance the stigmatization of out-of-touch northern liberalism.

The elections of 1964, 1976, and 1992 were all heralded as the beginnings of new permanent liberal majorities. In the first two cases, the inept governance of LBJ and Jimmy Carter ensured that Republicans were back in office in four years. Bill Clinton extended Democratic rule for eight years; but he did so without winning a majority of the votes in either election. Take Ross Perot out of the equation in 1992 — and perhaps even in 1996 — and Clinton might well not have won. Clinton survived Monica because no Americans were killed in his Balkans War, and because Dick Morris taught him the arts of triangulation, while the Republican Congress forced spending cuts that led finally to two years of budget surpluses. He left office popular, despite Monica, with balanced budgets and an assurance that the era of big government was over.

The September Meltdown

John McCain was ahead of Barack Obama when the September meltdown occurred. Had the financial panic not transpired until December, there was a 50-50 chance that McCain would have won — despite deep defections from the conservative base. In that case, we would be talking now about the continued Democratic propensity for self-destruction by nominating liberal northern presidential candidates like Obama, Kerry, Gore, Dukakis, and Mondale.

A Stealth Candidate

Obama was an especially charismatic candidate. His mixed racial heritage and exotic name were novelties that both intrigued and reassured elite white liberals, while galvanizing minorities in a way that Jesse Jackson and other traditional African-American candidates had previously not managed to do. Had the Democrats run Al Gore or John Kerry they might well have lost; or had Barack Obama, Kerry-like, paraded around in various costumes — duck-hunting camouflage, biker's spandex, a windsurfing wetsuit — or even kept up the arugula talk and the faux bowling appearances, he too would not have won.

On nearly every campaign issue — offshore drilling, nuclear power, NAFTA, guns, abortion, capital punishment, Iraq, the war on terror — candidate Obama hedged or triangulated in favor of the more conservative view. Had he in late October outlined a \$1.7-trillion deficit, the need for serial apologies abroad, and the nationalization of the banks and the auto industry, he would have lost.

Red Ink

But the above are peripheral issues. The real cause of unhappiness with the Republicans was simply that they could not make a convincing case for conservatism to a changing electorate because so many of them were not acting as conservatives.

Take the seminal issue of spending and expanding government. The last Republican to balance a budget was Dwight Eisenhower. Had President Bush — despite 9/11, Katrina, and two wars — simply limited spending increases to the rate of inflation and natural growth, then he would have entered his last years of office with balanced budgets.

In contrast, once Republicans started talking about federal deficits only in terms of manageable percentages of GDP rather than as real money, they forfeited the entire issue of fiscal responsibility, and lost the moral high ground. Barack Obama can get away with unprecedented and astronomical of projected deficits, in part because the Republicans are not credible any more on spending.

Compassionate Conservatism?

Compassionate conservatism was supposed to show the middle classes how, even with small government, lower taxes, and streamlining of existing programs, social protection was still ensured for those who did not do as well as the wealthy during the boom years.

Instead, it ended up as a rather crude quid pro quo on things like No Child Left Behind and the Medicare prescription-drug benefit. Bush's embrace of big old-fashioned spending was supposed to be a demonstration of bipartisanship that might extend to united congressional support for the war. Instead, Democrats cherry-picked the Bush overtures, increased their anti-war rhetoric, and then, *mirabile dictu*, attributed the ensuing deficits not to the profligate spending but to "tax cuts for the rich" — despite the yearly increases in aggregate federal revenue.

The War

Obama's continuance of the Iraq war, his escalation in Afghanistan, and his preservation of wiretaps, e-mail intercepts, renditions, Predator drone attacks, and, so far, the Guantanamo Bay detention center prove that Bush's war on terror per se, even the controversial Iraq war, did not lose Republicans the election. The problem was more complex than just the mayhem of the insurgency in Iraq, which was over by November 2008 — as witnessed by Obama's constant campaign demagoguing against the very Bush anti-terrorism protocols and war policies in Iraq and Afghanistan that he was soon to embrace.

When conservatives advance tough foreign-policy initiatives, they naturally evoke hostility from the therapeutic media. Instead of tough "smoke-'em-out" talk that reinforces the cowboy caricature, they needed to explain exactly why the resort to force was needed, what the strategy was, and why such a bad choice was better than the existing worse alternatives.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration was not able to articulate exactly what Iraq was about, why the congressional Democrats had willingly joined them to authorize the war on 23 counts (nearly all of them not about WMD), and why it was both moral and in the United States' interest to remove Saddam and not abandon the nascent Iraqi democracy.

Specterization

If the Republicans think they can outbid the Democrats for the support of feminists, gays, and growing numbers of minorities, then they will only add embarrassment and permanent failure to the present natural cycle of political correction. Instead, they must be ready to show that deficits of the present magnitude, when added to existing debt, are unsustainable and will sap the vitality of the entire American society.

Most people dread going to the DMV; that such a state-run blueprint will now be superimposed on manufacturing, energy, health care, and banking should scare the landscaper and the roofer alike. Precisely by showing to gays, women, minorities, and the young that none of us gets an exemption from the iron laws of nature — you cannot spend what you don't make; you can't apologize to unsavory characters and end up respected and safe; you can't expect government bureaucrats to make better

decisions than private executives — conservatives can become inclusive.

Conservatives should remind the electorate that the very wealthy, the Wall Street big money, and the elite in the universities and foundations are now consistently voting Democratic. It was the nexus between Wall Street financiers and lax liberal Democratic congressional overseers — the former wanting profits, the latter able to cloak lavish campaign contributions with populist rhetoric about caring for the poor — that got us into the financial mess.

The reason Sarah Palin earned real hatred was the populist nature of her appeal. Her rallies did not draw many of the government-dependent poor, true; but they also did not draw the rich and liberal elite. If Palin had survived the press demonization, she might have been able to show the electorate why the current leadership of the Democratic Party is at odds with the middle classes, who do not require most of the government entitlements that liberals love to dispense, and yet don't share the aristocratic tastes that the elite in the media, foundations, universities, and Wall Street see as requisites for paternal governance.

If the Republicans can offer a sane alternative of balanced budgets to the current mega-deficits; if they demonstrate the nexus between those who don't pay taxes and those who have so much money that they don't worry about taxes; and if they can talk without braggadocio of the tough choices abroad that are not solved by apologies, then they will win again in 2012.

Conservatism is the political belief that best mirrors human nature across time and space; but because its precepts are sometimes tragic and demand responsibility rather than ever-expanding rights, it requires adept communicators — not triangulators and appeasers whose pleasure is only for the moment.

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