

The Rise and Fall of the GOP



Following an editorial board meeting this summer with newly appointed National Republican Committee chairman Ed Gillespie, the *Manchester Union Leader* editorialized that Gillespie “said in no uncertain terms that the days of Reaganesque Republican railings against the expansion of the federal government are over. . . . Today the Republican Party stands for giving the American people whatever the latest polls say they want. . . . The people want expanded entitlement

programs and a federal government that attends to their every desire, no matter how frivolous? Then that’s what the Republican Party wants, too.”

Hmmm. Seems we’ve come a long way since the days of Ronald Reagan—not to mention Barry Goldwater. The decline of federalism and limited government in America accelerated in 1936 when FDR threatened to pack the Supreme Court if it didn’t turn a blind eye to blatantly unconstitutional legislation. Goldwater was the first GOP candidate for president to challenge that lamentable development and promise to return America to its heritage of liberty.

And Barry Goldwater was reaching America with his message. Many people forget that Goldwater was just a few points behind his good friend Jack Kennedy in the last poll taken prior to Kennedy’s assassination. Goldwater subsequently said that the moment he learned of Kennedy’s death he knew that he, Goldwater, would never be president. The American people were not about to, in effect, endorse an assassination by throwing out the incumbent party. True, Goldwater was demonized in 1964, but the depth of his defeat had less to do with that than it did with the assassination of President Kennedy (and nothing to do with Lyndon Johnson).

All of which tended to mask the resurgence of the Republican Party, which, thanks to the Goldwater campaign, had become a party of ideas with a coherent philosophy of limited government. Even the regrettable election of Richard Nixon (whose “philosophy” consisted of “screw my enemies”) twice to the presidency did not stop the growing philosophical sophistication of the GOP. Ronald Reagan’s memorable speech in support of Goldwater led directly to his election as governor of California in 1966 and then to the presidency in 1980. Reagan campaigned in a very Goldwateresque fashion. Government was a danger to our liberties and had grown far too large and intrusive. We should eliminate the Departments of Education and Energy because education and energy are not federal responsi-

bilities. Americans overwhelmingly endorsed that approach—just over two decades ago.

Things started to go downhill for the GOP philosophically speaking with the decision of the Reagan forces in 1984 to run a “Morning in America” campaign, long on beautiful scenery and short on ideas. Whether because of the Gipper’s declining health or gutless advisers, the campaign missed an incredible opportunity to capitalize on an enormously popular president by laying out specific programs to shrink the federal government. Reagan got his landslide, but no mandate. Reagan and his advisers compounded the uninspired second term by effectively turning over the presidency to George Bush, a man with few or no political principles. The first thing Bush did was empty the federal government of virtually all Reagan appointees.

The late 1980s and the 1990s also saw the rise of supply-side economics, which further undercut the GOP’s philosophical approach to governance. Don’t worry about all the nasty arguments about the proper role of government, the supply-siders argued. Just cut marginal tax rates and the economy will be spurred on to grow faster than government, thereby shrinking

government as a percentage of GDP. Tax cuts were and are a good idea, to be sure, but it was wrong to pretend the hard work of promoting limited government could be ignored. Republicans, with a few notable exceptions, stopped talking about less government.

The vacuous campaigns of George Bush and Bob Dole then gave us eight years of the political triangulation of Bill Clinton. The philosophical collapse of the GOP came with the 2000 campaign of George W. Bush, who ran without calling for a single spending cut, much less the elimination of programs, agencies, or

departments. Worse, neoconservatives moved to fill the philosophical vacuum created by the supply-siders. The neocons openly support big government and consider FDR to have been a great president. They are the intellectuals who came up with the “faith-based initiative” and like to frame the political debate as one between people who want religion in the political square and the secularists who don’t. The neocons are the ones who pushed Bush to call for greater federal government involvement in K-12 education than any president in American history.

And now the neocons are calling for American Empire. We have, indeed, come a long way from Reagan and Goldwater.

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—Edward H. Crane