

# IS CONSERVATISM OUT OF OXYGEN?

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**H**e came to power because of a national calamity that bonded the nation together behind him. Early in his presidency, he saw his popularity ascend to almost unworldly heights. And then came his war. For all his Texas' political cunning he could not make the hard decisions and extricate the United States from an unpopular war. His name of course was—Lyndon Johnson and his war was Vietnam.

George Santayana has told us: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Apparently recent American history is not in vogue in today's White House. It is eerie to observe the current similarities between the Bush and Johnson administrations. Bush's popularity would soar with the 9/11 attacks. As Johnson had used his popularity to form the Great Society, so Bush would use his momentum to restructure the federal tax system. Johnson's lowest point was in 1967 when, according to Gallup, he had a 27% favorable rating on his handling of the war. Bush is closing in on that number.

No one knew it at the time, but in fact Johnson's Great Society was the beginning of the end of liberalism's stamp on American pol-

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icy. Many believe that the same thing is happening to conservatism as Bush limps toward the end of his second term. It is very difficult to push a strong ideological agenda without a popular, if not charismatic political leader. After Johnson, liberalism began to stagnate throughout the country.

Reagan's ascendancy became almost a textbook example

of how public policy can be changed with a charismatic leader, some good ideas, and deeply held principles. Reagan's strongly held views of less government translated into the New Federalism. Under Reagan's New Federalism state capitols became important players in American public policy. More decisions were transferred from Beltway bureaucrats to foreign outposts like Springfield, Madison, Austin, and Sacramento.

In the 1980s, something extraordinary happened—conservatives became the messenger of reforms. The status quo became the liberal bureaucracies that had been created by Roosevelt and Johnson, and the new challenges for change came not from the Left, but

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from the Right. Liberals who had marched in the 1960s now sat as bureaucrats and academics throughout the country. They watched in horror as, around the country, free market think tanks began to multiply urging radical reform in institutions that the Left thought would be safe for generations.

Nowhere was this clearer than in the state of Wisconsin. Historically Wisconsin had been THE place where liberal ideology had evolved from academic theory to governmental fact. Late nineteenth century academics formulated "The Wisconsin Idea." They preached that THEY could best determine how people lived. Their view, which would later be championed by La Follette and the Progressive Movement, was that most of the great unwashed, especially immigrants who did not speak English, would never be able to determine the right paths in their lives. They needed guidance from an elite intelligentsia who had a better grasp of what was best for them. The idea of the "nanny state" emerged from "The Wisconsin Idea" at the turn of the twentieth century.

One hundred years later, the age of entitlements was clearly running out of steam. A Republican governor, Tommy Thompson, energized by Reagan's vision, began reforms to end the great entitlement programs of the Johnson administration. Welfare was literally taken apart. Educational vouchers, which had been a major issue for more than a century, would finally be enacted into law and create a national debate. There would be other reforms on issues like crime, taxation, and spending.

Conservatives had an agenda and they were set on reforming government. They also had enormous support for many of their ideas from the public, who had become disillusioned with liberal orthodoxy that had substituted government for their own personal judgment and eliminated personal responsibility on a plethora of issues. Conservatives were responding to serious social and domestic issues with solutions that were new, refreshing, and had energy behind them.

It began to look as if the prophesy of the conservative author Kevin Phillips was being fulfilled before our eyes—that there really was an emerging Republican majority.

And then the conservative agenda stalled. President George H.W. Bush's Desert Storm war policies carried him initially to tremendous popularity, but somewhere along the way he forgot about domestic policies and reform. By 1991, he was beginning to look very vulnerable. Voters had not forgotten his "Read my lips, no new taxes" pledge. Out of Texas came Ross Perot, who touched a populist strain deep in the American psyche that had been dormant for almost a generation. Even with Perot's meltdown in the 1992 race, he still received 19 percent of the vote. George H. W. Bush, a sitting incumbent Republican president, managed only 37 percent. The Republican revolution appeared to be in trouble. Initially Bill Clinton tried to advance the liberal agenda. Hillary Clinton looked to nationalize health care and the result was a crushing defeat.

Then came the 1994 election. Conservatives have created a dogma that it was Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" that caused the enormous sweep of Democrats from office. But what if that wasn't true? We had seen in 1992 a definitive rejection of a sitting President who happened to be a Republican. In some respects, Bush's defeat in 1992 was as large in scope as the rejection of the Democratic Congress in 1994. Rather than being ideological, what if it was the American tradition of "throwing the bums out of office?" Instead of one election, it had been two. The first to throw an incumbent Republican President out of office and the second to throw an incumbent Democratic Congress out of office.

If it wasn't ideological in 1994, then the conservative agenda that started under Reagan was not necessarily the energy behind the conservatism of the 1990s. There is little question that through the 1990s and into the new century, conservatism in this country changed at all levels. Where they had been the reformers and

attackers of the status quo, conservative ideas and principles *became* the status quo. One of the major issues for conservatives in the early 1990s had been term limits. Yet as dozens of Republicans were swept into Congress in 1994 the idea of term limits became a pledge to ignore. Sure, term limits were good when the incumbents were Democrats, but conservatives decided that when THEY were elected, people really wanted THEM in office. And so they broke their word. But it wasn't just term limits. Ideals were disintegrating across the state and national political landscape. Lobbyists began to multiply like rabbits. Scandals, which had always been thought to be a Democratic staple, began to break out. Throughout the country indictments began to grow like leaves in a windstorm. Republican majorities at the state and federal level did little to change public policy or advance conservative ideas.

President Bush used his political capital early in his term to reform the federal tax system. As his popularity began to wane, he could not shepherd a conservative agenda through Congress. It is stunning that, with a Republican majority in the House and Senate, Bush was not able to make his tax cuts permanent. Spending and deficits exploded. Major conservative issues, such as reforming Social Security, fell on deaf Republican ears. The rationale for keeping a Republican majority simply came down to "we're not as bad as the Democrats." Unfortunately, voters didn't buy that argument and, in 2006, swept Republicans from office throughout the country. Unlike 1994, where at least the Republicans had ideas, the Democrats said little and allowed the Republicans to drown in their own sea of hypocrisy and inaction.

One of the best examples of Republican malaise was in the state of Wisconsin. For several years there had been enormous statewide public support (by almost 3-to-1 ratios) to enact legislation that would put caps on government spending. But apparently passing any legislation that voters wanted seemed a perverse idea to the Republican majority in Madison. The 2006 election strategy became very easy for the Democrats—simply to

remind voters that they were neither George W. Bush nor Republicans. It worked, not only in Wisconsin, but also throughout the country.

To a large degree inertia has dominated through the last decade. Where we once were viewed as the engine of ideas, we are now viewed as part of the problem. The Republican party has managed to leap from majority to minority status in the blink of an eye. This raises an interesting question. Who needs them? Should future conservative ideas revolve around the integrity of the Republican party? If Republicans win and ignore their pledges, it stops free market ideas in their tracks. Setting a serious conservative agenda is more important than worrying about Republican victories. No one misses the Republican leadership in either Madison or Washington, with the exception of administration officials now facing subpoenas.

All of this is a prelude to where we stand today. There clearly needs to be a new conservative agenda, based on what is likely to happen over the next decade. For the next election cycle, conservatives need to focus on new ideas. There are issues out there that make sense, starting with term limits. Liberals continue to tell us that money is the core problem in our political system. Actually, the problem is incumbency. The public supports the idea of new faces in government. This is a very good issue for conservatives regardless of opposition from incumbents and lobbyists.

Curbing taxes and spending—the political establishment may not like TABOR, but the public does. Balancing budgets both in Washington and at the state level—everyone is aware that the federal budget runs on deficits, but so do many states. In Wisconsin we have two sets of books. That must end. We should start following the state's constitution in real terms and not in the never-never land of smoke and mirrors that now exists in Madison.

Criminal justice—there may not be a lot of support among lobbyists, but Wisconsinites are clearly concerned about rising crime. Perhaps the two biggest Republican victories throughout the country in the last six months both occurred in Wisconsin—J.B. Van Hollen

as attorney general and Annette Ziegler as a new state Supreme Court justice. Both ran on a very strong anti-crime platform. It is not real hard to connect the dots

Then there is education. We still need education reforms in Wisconsin, especially in Milwaukee. Wisconsin's economic future is directly tied to be able to produce an educated workforce for this century. Mediocrity can no longer be tolerated.

Finally, the Wisconsin Supreme Court—while a lot of Wisconsinites may have TV fatigue from the just completed election,

Annette Ziegler's election sets the stage for a judicial election next year that will have long-term consequences. Supreme Court Justice "Loophole" Louis Butler must finally run for an elected term. He was appointed by Governor Doyle after a resounding rejection by Wisconsin voters in his failed race to be *elected* to the Supreme Court. This is a very real chance to take the Supreme Court back from liberals intent on stamping their long-term agenda on Wisconsinites with or without legislative support. If that does not energize voters, then conservatives are not out of gas, they are out of oxygen.