

CLARIFYING REPUBLICAN IDENTITY

F. JAMES SENSENBRENNER

Election Night, November 7, 2006, exceeded all of our expectations. We Republicans expected to take a hit that night, but the hit was even deeper and sharper than anticipated. Gathered around televisions—in family rooms—in up-north bars—and in hotel banquet rooms with political party faithfuls—the sting was felt, heads were shaking, fingers were pointing. Republicans fidgeted as the results appeared across the screens, while Democrats likely felt the elation of winning the battle of vindication.

Instantaneously, the question “why?” was answered with, “the war.” The unpopular war had slaughtered Republicans while the liberal, anti-war rhetoric blazed across the country. Residents in my own 5th Congressional District had unanswered questions about the war and their confidence was rattled. I listened over and over again to their frustration in my townhall meetings, and there were no reassuring answers from the President prior to the election. However, I am of the opinion that it was not, and is not, all about the war. It’s about more than Iraq and our war on terrorism. As conservatives, it’s about our *identity*.

I believe if we get back to basics, there is a real opportunity to demonstrate once again why Republicans are the ones with the better ideas.

Just like our schools maybe should get back to the three R’s, Republicans must return to the basics of conservatism to again be the more popular party in America. While I must sound like an old guy, the Republicans of present are not the Republicans this country has known and loved over the course of history. Republicans simply forgot about being the Party of fiscal

restraint and didn’t remember what brought them to power. Republicans forgot to say government is too big and too intrusive. Many of my fellow Republicans got a little taste of pork and couldn’t help themselves as they participated in the spending frenzy. I watched as earmarks and pork barrel projects were approved, but I did not watch in silence. I was lonesome, and unpopular with the local media when I voted against Hurricane Katrina emergency funding and the Highway Bill—packages laced with fraud and fat. I waved my hands wildly in protest as my fellow Republicans signed off on projects such as the “bridge to nowhere.” Whatever happened to living within our means? Republicans forgot to be conservatives.

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Polls I conducted indeed indicated that folks were mad about the war, but a closer look revealed that people were also disgusted with government spending. In my district, those identifying themselves as Democrats increased slightly from past years; however, more notably, those calling themselves Republicans declined and they moved into the Independent column in search of a new identity. Independent voters in districts like mine went from 2-1 Republican in 2004 to 2-1 Democrat in 2006. So, the red flags were firmly in place prior to Election Night.

Republican leadership did not help the cause. Leadership became part of the problem, not the solution. We were plagued with allegations of leadership corruption as our leaders stopped listening and became much more interested in receiving support for their own power rather than worrying about the money that was flying out of the pockets of taxpayers. As Chair of the House Judiciary Committee, I remained steadfast in my efforts to produce legislative initiatives to further values-based conservative principles. I am proud of my work to help protect the safety of Americans through the reauthorization of the Patriot Act, Violence Against Women Act, Child Safety Act, and Real ID. In addition, we were able to re-authorize the Voting Rights Act, and accom-

plish Bankruptcy Reform. I believe these are good, conservative ideas that made their way to the President's desk and are now signed into law. Good for us. Good for all Americans.

In the new 110th Congress, the Democrats will lead, but Republicans must speak up and remind the American public of the difference between the parties and philosophies. Conservatives need to act like liberals. They do a great job of standing up for what they believe in. All you have to do is show up at one of my Town Hall meetings to see how they operate. We need to do the same. We need to speak up and share our ideas.

I believe if we get back to basics, there is a real opportunity to demonstrate once again why Republicans are the ones with the better ideas. We are the party of lower taxes, smaller government, and conservative values. I will continue to speak up proudly and remind one and all of who we are and what we stand for. Let's not forget what makes us right and strong. Let's not forget that being Republican means being conservative.

So, you see, conservative ideas are not dead. We need to do a better job of communicating our thoughts. In this Congress, I will be an active participant, sharing conservative ideas and protecting conservative ideals.