

How the GOP Lost Its Way

Michael-In-Norfolk - - Coming Out In Mid Life

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Body

As a former **GOP** activist - I was on a local city committee for 8 years - I remember a time when one did not need to be either a religious fanatic, a thinly veiled white supremacist, or driven by greed and obsessed with lower taxes to be a Republican. Sadly, those days are long gone and I and many others - including a number of LGBT bloggers I know - fled the **GOP** where after the Christofascist take over, we are deemed not even fully human and certainly not entitled to any civil rights. As I've noted before, my entire extended family more or less has fled the insane asylum that has become today's **GOP**. I blame most of the change in the **GOP** on the emergence Christian Right as the real puppet masters of the party. In Virginia, the Republican Party of Virginia has become a de facto branch of The Family Foundation, a virulently anti-modernity affiliate of Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council. What I find especially chilling about the Christianist take over is that it has coincided with a level of selfishness and greed and intolerance that never used to be the principal hallmarks of the **GOP**. A lengthy column in the Washington Post looks at this slide away from caring about the common good and the embracing of far right extremism. Here are some excerpts:

To secure his standing as the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, Mitt Romney has disowned every sliver of moderation in his record. He's moved to the right on tax cuts and twisted himself into a pretzel over the health-care plan he championed in Massachusetts because conservatives are no longer allowed to acknowledge that government can improve citizens' lives.

Romney is simply following the lead of Republicans in Congress who have abandoned American conservatism's most attractive features: prudence, caution and a sense that change should be gradual. But most important of all, conservatism used to care passionately about fostering community, and it no longer does. This commitment now lies buried beneath slogans that lift up the heroic and disconnected individual or the job creator with little concern for the rest.

Today's conservatism is about low taxes, fewer regulations, less government and little else. Anyone who dares to define it differently faces political extinction. Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana was considered a solid conservative, until conservatives decided that anyone who seeks bipartisan consensus on anything is a sellout. Even Orrin Hatch of Utah, one of the longest-serving Republican senators, is facing a primary challenge. His flaw? He occasionally collaborated with the late Democratic senator Edward M. Kennedy on providing health insurance coverage for children and encouraging young Americans to join national service programs.

Conservatism today places individualism on a pedestal, but it originally arose in revolt against that idea.

The great American conservative William F. Buckley Jr. certainly understood this. In his book *Gratitude: Reflections on What We Owe to Our Country*, he quotes approvingly John Stuart Mill's insistence that everyone who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit. With liberty comes responsibility to the community.

How the GOP Lost Its Way

Before the Civil War, conservatives such as Alexander Hamilton and Henry Clay believed in an active federal government that served the common good. This included a commitment to internal improvements (what we now, less elegantly, call infrastructure), public schooling, and the encouragement of manufacturing and science. Clay, an unapologetic supporter of national economic planning, called his program the American System, explicitly distinguishing his idea from the British laissez-faire system. (The Club for Growth would not have been pleased.)

Civil War pensions the first great social insurance program and a central Republican cause were supporting about 28 percent of men 65 and over by 1910. In 1894, the program's most expensive year, the pensions accounted for 37 percent of federal spending. Sounds like a massive entitlement program, doesn't it?

And the first American version of socialized medicine was signed into law in 1798 by that great conservative president, John Adams. The Marine Hospital Service funded hospitals across the country to treat sailors who were sick or got injured on the job. There is no record of a mass campaign to repeal AdamsCare.

Dwight Eisenhower created the interstate highway system and established the federal student loan program in the 1950s. More recently, Ronald Reagan never tried to dismantle the New Deal and acknowledged, sometimes with wry humor, the need for tax increases. He was acutely alive to the communal side of conservatism.

In other words, until recently conservatives operated within America's long consensus that accepted a market economy as well as a robust role for a government that served the common good. American politics is now roiled because this consensus is under the fiercest attack it has faced in more than 100 years.

Modern conservatism's rejection of its communal roots is a relatively recent development. It can be traced to a simultaneous reaction against Bush's failures and Barack Obama's rise.

Bush's unpopularity at the end of his term encouraged conservatives, including the fledgling tea party movement, to distance themselves from his legacy. They declared that Bush's shortcomings stemmed from his embrace of big government and big spending even if much of the spending was in Iraq and Afghanistan. They recoiled from his compassionate conservatism, deciding, as right-wing columnist Michelle Malkin put it, that compassionate conservatism and fiscal conservatism were never compatible.

Obama, in the meantime, pitched communal themes from the moment he took office The more he emphasized a better balance between the individual and the community, the less interested conservatives became in anything that smacked of such equilibrium.

It's why they cannot accept (as Romney and the Heritage Foundation once did) energetic efforts by the government to expand access to health insurance. It's why, even after a catastrophic financial crisis, they continue to resist new rules aimed not at overturning capitalism but at making it more stable.

[W]hen we balance our individualism with a sense of communal obligation that we are most ourselves as Americans. The 20th century was built on this balance, and we will once again prove the prophets of U.S. decline wrong if we can refresh and build upon that tradition. But doing so will require conservatives to abandon untempered individualism, which betrays what conservatism has been and should be.

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