

CONSERVATIVE IDEAS WILL PREVAIL

JOHN MCADAMS

Why, just now, would we be discussing whether “conservatism has run out of gas?” The answer is obvious: the Democratic sweep in the 2006 elections.

But, my conservative readers will quickly say, the election was not about conservatism, it was about the Republican Party. That party, they will insist, is a flawed representative of “conservatism,” and if the party was a better representative, things would have gone well.

That claim is partly true, but fully misleading. Foreign policy conservatism—defined as a vigorous response to terrorism and to terrorist regimes—did take a drubbing.

But the fact is that the Republican Party must be the representative of conservative ideas in American politics or else nobody will. Or at least, nobody with the power to make conservative ideas anything more than the arcane notions of an impotent fringe.

Viewed from this perspective, the 2006 election was about the best thing that could have happened to the Republican Party, and therefore to conservatism.

Lord Acton was doubtless correct when he said that power corrupts. But he could have



added: possession of power in a democracy comes with a lot of baggage, and that baggage (like useless items in one’s attic) accumulates over time. The 2006 house-cleaning, imposed on Republicans by the voters, will be seen in retrospect as a boom.

It is now the Democrats who are accumulating the baggage. Consider the pitfalls that have afflicted that party in Congress.

- House Speaker Pelosi supported John Murtha for the position of House Majority Leader, and was beaten on this issue by her own caucus.
- Pelosi seriously (and quite visibly) considered appointing the ethically challenged Alcee Hastings to be chair of the House Intelligence Committee, creating a considerable amount of negative publicity before she backed off.
- Democrats passed a “non-binding resolution” in the House opposing Bush’s “troop surge.” This, of course, was the sort of feckless measure that was guaranteed to alienate both the hard Left (because it did

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nothing to actually stop the war) and conservatives (because it send a message of encouragement to the enemy).

- The Democrats failed to pass that resolution in the Senate. Politically, it was the worst of both worlds: a very bad idea, which the party lacked the competence to actually enact.
- John Murtha articulated a “slow bleed” strategy against the war, claiming the Democrats would deprive them of the materiel to fight the war.¹
- “Blue dog” Democrats rebelled against Pelosi and the left wing of the party, making it clear that they do not want to undermine American troops in combat.
- Democratic claims of environmental sensitivity have been undercut by revelations of lavish energy use by top liberal Democrats. The fact that Al Gore’s mansion and guest house consumes 20 times the national average amount of electricity was just one instance.
- Democratic promises to create a more “ethical” Congress are turning out to be a sham. John Murtha called the Democratic ethics bill “total crap,” and Steny Hoyer, the fellow who beat out Murtha to be House Majority Leader, enjoyed a lavish golf outing in Puerto Rico at the expense of lobbyist.²

Democratic baggage, in other words, is building up. They have accumulated quite a lot given how new the 110th Congress is. And there is no reason to think that over time the party will get better ideas, or more competent leadership, or more cohesion in pursuing its agenda.

So where does this leave the Republicans? Out of power, and with little chance of achieving any policy agenda. But that, right now, is a healthy place for them to be.

Sooner or later, the Republicans will be back in power. That’s the way American politics works. What will be their strategic position against the Democrats? And most importantly,

how are the Republicans doing in the War of Ideas?

The answer is: pretty well. It’s not exactly that the Republicans have “new ideas.” Republican ideas about welfare reform were enacted in the 1990s. School choice is an idea that, in the modern era, dates back to Milton Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom*.

It’s just that, if Republican ideas are getting a bit old, Democratic ideas are a lot older. Compared to school choice, throwing more money at the current public school monopoly seems downright quaint.

While medical saving accounts to help people pay for their own medical care isn’t a new idea, the liberals’ lust for socialized medicine goes back at least to 1948, when a Labour government in Britain imposed that system on the country.

While the American public doesn’t yet know enough economics to oppose the Minimum Wage, the Democrats’ support for organized labor seems downright quaint. And their support for the trial lawyers seems downright sleazy.

Privatization of Social Security is not an idea whose time has come—yet. But the increasing number of Americans whose retirement benefits are based on “defined contribution” (the employer pays into a fund that the employee owns and controls) rather than “defined benefit” (the employee has a promise of lavish benefits in the future *if* the lavish benefits don’t drive the company into bankruptcy) is likely to whet the appetites of future generations of retirees.

The now-decreasing government deficit and (by the standards of the past few decades) historically low unemployment should dampen the zeal of a fair number of moderates for tax increases.

On issues like gay marriage and the death penalty, Republicans represent robust majorities of public opinion against the liberal elites. On abortion, Republicans represent the conservative half of a public split down the middle.

And a majority of Americans continue to oppose racial preferences. If Republicans can muster the courage to appeal to that majority, it will be a boon.

In a democracy, nothing guarantees that good ideas win. It depends on committed activists, capable party leaders, sympathetic public intellectuals, the emergence of good candidates—and sometimes a fair amount of luck. But conservatives hardly face any enduring or insurmountable difficulties.

Notes

1. The term “slow-bleed” was not Murtha’s, but was used to (accurately) describe Murtha’s position by John Harris of Politico.com.
2. <http://marketplace.publicradio.org/shows/2007/02/20/PM200702205.html>.