

NOT DEAD YET

CHARLES J. SYKES

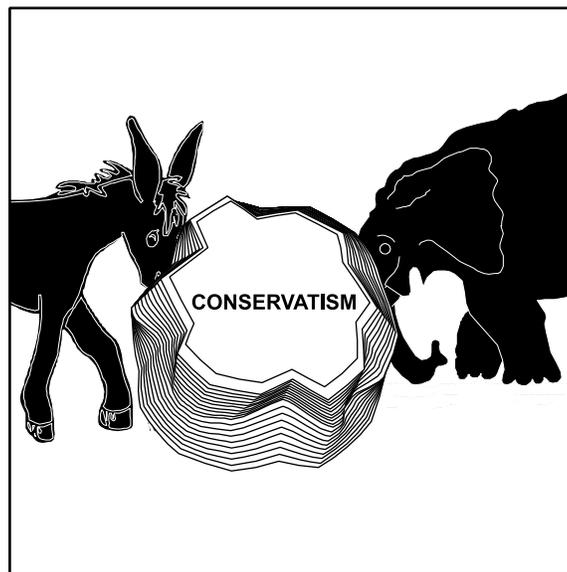
Is conservatism out of gas? For the time being perhaps, but in the long run, not at all.

Ideas, after all, do matter a great deal, and not even a blowout like 2006 changes that dynamic. So even though the challenges are formidable, the next few years provide some promising opportunities.

Modern conservatism is at its best when it is Reformist and Reactionary—when it reacts against the initiatives and depredations of the Left.

But this requires the left to actually have initiatives, or be in a position to enact programs or policies that require intellectual and political opposition. During the last eight years, the left has taken a vacation from responsibility, leaving conservatives to play against themselves.

The harsh reality is that liberals will always be more comfortable in government than conservatives. They are after all, the party of government, believing in its almost infinite capacity to solve our problems and run our lives. Conservatives, on the other hand, generally want government to get out of their way. When conservatives became enamored of gov-



ernment power, they ceased to be conservatives, whatever their party label. As a result, conservatives are often better in opposition than in office.

When they are in office, conservatives are most effective when they mitigate or even roll back the worst government abuses; policies that impede economic growth; reward dysfunction; or undermine public safety

and security. Throughout the 1980s and even into the 1990s, conservatives enacted much of that reformist agenda.

But along the way the GOP (as distinct from conservatism per se) not only appeared to lose interest in rolling back (or God forbid) abolishing government programs, but instead joined in the expansion of bureaucracy and pork.

In 2006, a complacent Republican majority tried to retain power by playing on the fear of Democratic rule. But since the Democrats ran on precisely nothing, the strategy did little to divert attention from the GOP's train wreck.

Charles J. Sykes is the editor of Wisconsin Interest and a Senior Fellow of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. He also hosts a talk-radio show on AM 620 WTMJ in Milwaukee.

The corruption scandals of recent years were simply the final nail in the GOP's reformist credentials. It may take years to get them back (although another Clinton presidency would seem to be a target-rich environment).

The downward trajectory was eerily parallel in Washington and Madison: in both cities, Republicans came to view their legislative majorities as political entitlements rather than as challenges to get something done. In Congress, a new-found taste for pork spending squandered the party's credibility for fiscal restraint; in Madison, the failure to pass a Taxpayer Protection Amendment effectively surrendered the tax issue.

Conservatism's High Water Mark

If 2006 marked a low point, the late seventies and eighties marked a political and intellectual high point for modern conservatives, when the reaction to the disastrous economic, social, and national security policies of the Great Society and the Carter presidency shaped a generation of newly-minted conservatives.

For years I've described myself as a "recovering liberal," and I know that I'm not alone. Everyone has a slightly different story, but the theme is the same: we saw the liberal future and it wasn't pretty.

Despite a massive War on Poverty, central cities were collapsing under the battering of violent crime, family disintegration, and social dysfunction. Welfare had created a generational cycle of dependence; civil rights had somehow transmogrified from Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of racial equality to an identity politics built around victimization and racial quotas. The economy was a basket case, with high taxes and anti-growth policies threatening the middle class and seemingly blocking their children from aspiring to a better life. Liberalism seemed content with declaring the end of both economic growth and the American Dream.

Across the globe, America was in retreat always everywhere, our weakness dramatized by our failure to free the Iranian hostages. Still hung over from Vietnam, the Left had become

addicted to what Jean Kilpatrick later called "Blaming America First."

For many recovering liberals of my father's generation, liberalism became increasingly unrecognizable, as it slid toward both anti-Americanism and cultural elitism. An example that embodied the shift: the left's attitudes toward "work" and the working class: During the New Deal era, liberalism was about assuring fairness in the work place and rewards for working men and women who played by the rules. By the 1970s, the elites of the left had come to view working men – think "hard-hats" – with barely concealed disdain. To the Reagan Democrats, the party of their fathers—of the union halls—had morphed into a party of "acid, amnesty, and abortion."

Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, a second wave of reaction began, this time against the stifling orthodoxies on college campuses, known as political correctness; against the federal government's bid to take over health care; against dumbed down, value-free, and complacent public education; and the arrogance of an entrenched congressional oligarchy that had become disconnected with the anxieties and interests of the public.

The reactions of the 1970s lead directly to the election of Ronald Reagan, while the reactions of the early 1990s lead to the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress. The Conservative Revolution was impelled by the reaction to the overweening ambitions of dysfunctional government and the conceit of the elites that they knew better than individuals how to run their lives.

What happened? To a large extent: success.

Tax rates were cut; welfare was reformed; some of the more onerous and irrational regulations modified; the economy revived; crime was attacked, prisons built, and laws toughened; education reform was at least addressed; the national defense was strengthened; and, for a generation, the American Dream was restored.

Unlike most of the triumphs of 1960s liberalism, moreover, the conservative initiatives have been, by and large, successful: welfare

rolls have dropped; violent crime in most major cities has dropped; the economy is showing remarkable buoyancy (and at this writing the Dow is over 12,000), schools are being pressured to raise standards and focus on basics; and despite the frustration over the Iraq war, America is the undisputed super-power of the world.

But in the absence of serious initiatives from the Left, modern-day conservatives too often seemed like the Robert Redford character from the 1972 movie “The Candidate.” The character wins the campaign, only to ask “What do we do now?”

The ascendancy (at least for the time being) of the left may give conservatives a chance to answer that question.

Ideas Still Matter

They should start by defining the terms of the debate between the left and the right.

Today the left offers:

- Grievance (the politics of victimization)
- Entitlement
- Class envy (and the politics of Redistribution)
- Bureaucracy and the Nanny State (the belief that if there is a problem there is a government solution and that it can safely be entrusted to bureaucrats)
- Tax increases
- Group identity
- Collectivism
- Litigation
- Multiculturalism
- Ambivalence on security

In contrast the conservative “packets” include:

- Freedom
- Opportunity
- Growth
- Tax cuts

- Common sense (which includes tort reform)
- Personal responsibility
- Individualism
- American exceptionalism
- Strong national security

Notably missing from my list are specific references to social issues, especially those involving sex and procreation. Of course, social conservatism will always be a part of any broadly-based conservative movement, as it was under Reagan. But it may no longer be the defining bright line that it has been in recent years. The early popularity of former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani—who is strongly conservative on economic and security issues, but liberal on social hot-buttons like abortion and gay rights—may represent a new willingness for conservatives to reprioritize their issues.

This is not to suggest abandoning principled opposition to the culture of death, but tactically, conservatives should turn the focus from issues that are both divisive and ultimately irresolvable and begin to emphasize the issues of personal responsibility that reestablish its link with the broad rational national consensus.

The ever-increasing Hollywoodization of the left should make this easier because it means that their cultural anchor will be on the far left coast of the country, far from the mainstream. The parents of preteen children are unlikely to look with confidence to Rosie O’Donnell or Barbra Streisand for advice or guidance.

The Opportunities Ahead

Domestically, the next decade will see initiatives to expand the reach and intrusiveness of the nanny state and perhaps to attempts to tighten regulation and control of new media. All of them will provide opportunities for conservatives to rally opposition on principled free-market grounds.

Liberals will also raise taxes. A lot. A House resolution passed earlier this year would raise taxes by a staggering \$400 billion, hitting most middle-class voters. While those increases are

likely to be scaled back, they represent an impulse that will be the centerpiece of domestic politics for much of the next decade.

Tax cuts, are and will remain at the heart of any conservative agenda, because they represent the fundamental faith of conservatives in the ability of individuals to spend their own money more rationally than government. Low taxes also are the engine of opportunity and economic growth.

The left needs massive tax hikes, in part, because they are also intent on bringing back the push for national health care. Both sides should remember that the last time the issue was raised, it resulted in a conservative electoral landslide. The public hates health insurance companies, but they fear government bureaucracy more. They've been to the Division of Motor Vehicles and they don't want to turn over their health care to the same people.

Despite the recognition by thoughtful liberals of the dangers of identity politics, modern liberalism is too far gone to turn back. Do not be surprised if younger voters, unburdened by memories of the civil rights era, are increasingly repelled by racial policies that defy their innate sense of fairness.

Activist liberal judges may also feel emboldened to hand down rulings that defy both public sensibilities and common sense, once again providing conservatives an opportunity to draw a contrast between the unconstrained views of the left and the modesty of judicial restraint.

Democrats also seem to be increasingly following the lead of their more radical net-roots and thus risk re-McGovernizing the party. The 2008 election will probably turn on Iraq and terrorism, and both parties need to realize that the public mood could shift in an instant, if there is a domestic attack or international meltdown. Despite John Kerry's rhetoric about the need for the United States to submit its policies to a "global test," Americans will not outsource our national defense.

American exceptionalism may be tired, but it is not exhausted or played out. Bruised we may be, but America is still mankind's last best hope.

The left is betting that Americans are so weary of the responsibilities of power that they want to turn out the harsher elements of fighting terror. As a result, the leading Democrats are in a frantic scramble to the left. If they are correct and national security is no longer top-of-mind for voters, they are likely to win in 2008; if they misjudge the times and the public mood, next year could turn out to be more like 1972 (when a McGovernite Democratic party was crushed) than 1992 (when the voters turned to Bill Clinton because it was "time for a change.").

Economic and technological changes also provide opportunities.

Despite the Bush Administration's abandonment of the "Ownership Society," the reality is that we are all capitalists now.

The class-envy politics of "Us vs. Them" may be emotionally and ideologically satisfying, but the economic landscape has shifted. The majority of Americans now own stocks, which means that most Americans are capitalists, with a direct and personal investment not only in the overall economy, but in the business climate and stock market.

The digital revolution may also seal the fate of collectivism: the decentralization of information is driving the decentralization of decision-making and undermines the notion of centralization of control or decision-making.

Socialism's window of opportunity has closed.

The *Wall Street Journal's* Daniel Henninger already detects the impact of these changes on politics. Political thinking is increasingly fluid, made not of consistent hierarchical and consistent ideology, but of disparate "packets" that allow voters to pick and choose ideas from across the spectrum. "The Big Solution is wholly alien to the packet-switching political mindset now," writes Henninger.

In other words, the culture of "You Tube" is subversive to all orthodoxies; and what is more orthodox than political correctness, centralized government, and collectivism?