

Off Base

Is the future of the GOP Scots-Irish or Indian-American?

By Sean Scallon

SAMUEL “JOE” WURZELBACHER didn’t plan on becoming famous. Or getting a book deal. Or being offered a Nashville recording contract. When Barack Obama came to his Holland, Ohio neighborhood during the fall campaign, Wurzelbacher simply asked the candidate an honest question about his tax policy, and Obama gave him an honest answer about “spread[ing] the wealth around.”

But from that moment on, “Joe the Plumber” became the symbol of John McCain’s presidential campaign, a cultural totem that Republican strategists hoped would energize white, working-class voters—“Average Joes,” you might say. McCain’s handlers knew what they were doing when they had their candidate repeatedly invoke Joe, and his question about Obama’s tax policy, in the last presidential debate. They also knew what they were doing when they elevated Joe from local plumber to campaign surrogate.

That McCain only excited the Republican base when other people were campaigning with him—Joe the Plumber or running mate Sarah Palin—testifies to his weakness as a candidate. But it also suggests how important identity politics has become within the Republican Party and shows that the core constituencies for the GOP are white and working or middle class—Scots-Irish, Appalachian, Southern Baptist, “hockey mom,” and “Joe Six-Pack.” These are the party’s most loyal voters, and they helped McCain avoid an election rout of Mondale proportions. The question for the GOP going forward is whether this cur-

rent of identity politics will persist or whether Obama’s presidency will create conditions that will require playing to different identities in 2012.

Not since 1968 or 1972—possibly not since 1928—had a presidential campaign delved so deeply into the composition of the white middle class. Before the 2008 election, the term “Scots-Irish” was bandied about primarily by demographers and League of the South members. But Kevin Phillips, whose 1969 book *The Emerging Republican Majority* taught the party to build a winning coalition of Sunbelt whites and urban Catholics, has had his eye on this group for years. His 1999 book, *The Cousins’ Wars*, described the settlement patterns of Scots-Irish emigrating to the U.S. from Ulster. The course of their migration neatly tracks the map of states and counties that McCain hoped to win. The Scots-Irish often settled first in south-central Pennsylvania and then moved south along the Appalachian Trail into western Virginia and the western Carolinas, then moved west into Kentucky, Tennessee, northern Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, or north into southern Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio and across the Mississippi River into Arkansas, Missouri, Texas, and Oklahoma. Most of these states McCain carried by sizeable margins, and even in Obama’s home state of Illinois, the southern portion—known as “Little Egypt”—voted for McCain.

Phillips’s 2006 book, *American Theocracy*, detailed how this Ulster-colonized heartland sent its surplus population westward and northward to mining

camp and dam projects in the mountain West, auto plants and other factories in the industrial Midwest, all the way to the oilfields and mines of Palin’s Alaska. In the wake of these waves of internal migration came the Southern Baptist Convention and other Southern-based Christian denominations. Over the generations, the Scots-Irish white, Christian, middle- and working-class identity that seeded much of the country broadened enough to allow other whites like Joe Wurzelbacher (who comes from a German-settled area of northwest Ohio) and Governor Palin (whose married name is Norman in origin and whose maiden name, Heath, is Scots-English) to identify with it.

Phillips gave the GOP a blueprint for turning these demographics into a political base with *The Emerging Republican Majority*. But it wasn’t Karl Rove who built the machine—it was William Brock, the former Tennessee senator who headed the Republican National Committee from 1977 to 1981. Republicans were in even worse shape at the beginning of Brock’s tenure than they are now, not just thanks to Watergate but because the old patronage system that traded government jobs for votes and campaign work had collapsed. In order for the GOP to remain competitive with the Democrats, the party needed to align itself with special-interest groups and single-issue voters that could provide organizational and financial muscle to compete with the Democratic interest blocs that emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s. Brock found what he was

looking for in the form of interest groups with roots in Scots-Irish culture—the culture of, among other things, God and guns. The National Rifle Association became politicized in 1977; the Moral Majority was founded in 1979; and the right-to-life movement aligned itself with the GOP starting in 1980. These groups were overwhelmingly white and middle class. Soon they became the cultural archetypes for red states and counties across the country.

They were, and are, deeply unpopular with the groups that have come to be identified with the Democratic Party: not just minority voters but also highly educated urban and suburban elites. Even Republican-leaning intellectuals in blue cities tend to be uncomfortable with the GOP base—and with the party's appeals to the base. Yet however queasy God and guns might make David Brooks, the Republicans could not ditch their core constituencies now even if they wanted to. If their base were suddenly to vanish, the GOP would find itself only slightly bigger than the Libertarian Party. So long as white voters over 30 make up 63 percent of the electorate, columnist Mort Kondracke has recently argued, the GOP will be wedded to its white, religious, and middle-class base.

And if anything, middle-class white identity voting may intensify as the proportion of whites declines to the point that they will no longer be a majority by 2042. Loss of political power as a fraction of the electorate may prompt them to redouble their support for candidates who share their values and social-economic background. We've already seen a preview of this intensification in the reaction from the Republican base to the choice of Palin as the party's vice presidential nominee.

Many standard-bearers for the Republican base, from James Dobson and Pat Buchanan to country-music singer John Rich, suddenly forgot all of their reser-

vations about McCain as soon as Palin's name was added to his. Anecdotes abounded in the news about McCain signs flying off the shelves of local Republican headquarters and volunteers streaming in after Palin was chosen, in contrast to the trickle of interest before. More important for the base than her positions on issues or her experience—or lack thereof—was her life story, large family, religion, and her image as a hunter and outdoors enthusiast. Those establishment and cosmopolitan conservatives who take care to remain in the good graces of the base—Bill Kristol, Sean Hannity, and Fred Barnes, among others—defended her strenuously. Criticisms of Palin by anonymous McCain aides since the campaign ended have only strengthened the base's attachment to her. They see attacks upon her as attacks upon them, and that only deepens their sense of being persecuted by an elite. This is no different from the reaction African-American voters have had toward scandal-stained politicians like Congressmen William Jefferson or Adam Clayton Powell.

Whatever her liabilities, Palin did help McCain put together a respectable showing in the Electoral College. Had the vice-presidential nod gone to Mitt Romney or McCain's personal favorite, Joe Lieberman, turnout by the base would have been further depressed and Obama might have added Missouri, Montana, the Dakotas, Georgia, and Alaska to his column and could have been competitive in South Carolina, Kansas, and Nebraska.

But Palin's candidacy exemplifies another electoral current as well, one that flows in a direction opposite to that of traditional Republican identity politics. This other tendency cannot provide the number of voters that appeals to the base supply, but it does have the power of the establishment, both in and outside the party, behind it. What's more,

future demographic changes will only strengthen this force. Call it the diversity current.

Time favors the diversity current. As Steve Sailer has pointed out, McCain's share of the white vote in 2008 would have been enough to win him the election—if it had been held in 1976. Sailer believes the GOP needs to increase its take of the white vote to 70 percent in order to win in the future. But that may not be possible. For every Scots-Irish vote the Republicans can get, there are voters from other white ethnic, economic, and cultural groups that might be lost. Overwhelmingly white Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, the New England states, Oregon, and Washington voted by comfortable margins for Obama, as Yankees, German and Scandinavian Protestants, and freethinkers aligned with the Democrats in reaction against the Scots-Irish culture of the GOP.

More fatefully, voters aged 18 through 30 went overwhelmingly for Obama. While such voters still only make up a small fraction of the electorate, they usually carry their political loyalties with them as they grow older. When Ronald Reagan carried young voters in 1984, it pointed to GOP victories in 1994 and the early part of this decade, as the Reagan generation maintained its loyalties as it grew older and became more numerous in the electorate. (Even young people who didn't vote in 1984 tended to have strong enough sympathies for Reagan that when they did begin voting, they were open to the GOP.) Even more alarming for the Republicans is that of the states McCain carried, only in eight—Alaska, Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Georgia, and West Virginia—did he win voters aged 18-30, according to exit polls. Missouri youngsters went 59 percent for Obama. In Tennessee, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Texas, the split was around 55-45 in favor of Obama. The Democrat gained

between 51 and 54 percent of the youth vote in Kentucky, Kansas, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, and Alabama. In Arkansas it was a tie. The youth vote was decisive in helping Obama carry North Carolina, as they voted for him by a whopping 74-26 margin and made up 18 percent of the electorate.

Conservatives have complained for years about identity voting among minority groups as an electoral form of affirmative action. But Republicans did what they could in 2008 to appeal to the diversity current: as her critics note, Palin's gender went a long way to making her McCain's running mate. Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty shared much the same background as Palin, and unlike her he was a loyal McCain supporter even during the summer of 2007, when the Arizonan's campaign was in grim shape. But Obama's nomination pushed the GOP to compete with the Democrats on the diversity scale, which meant she was on the ticket and Pawlenty was off.

Given the demographic trends, pressure on Republican leaders to respond to Obama's presidency by diversifying the party will only grow stronger. Ironically, the candidates the establishment wing of the GOP would find acceptable in 2012—Jeb Bush and Mitt Romney for example—may very well be overwhelmed by the diversity imperative the way Pawlenty was this year. If that's the case, the person who will benefit is Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, who could be the perfect candidate to balance the cosmopolitan and provincial wings of the party. He has Washington experience as a congressman but is seen as an outsider. He has a reputation as a reformer of Louisiana's notoriously corrupt state government. Unlike Palin, Jindal is a policy wonk, with experience in the health and human services field

Continued on page 34

Cowboy and Indians

President Bush could yet fulfill his liberation fantasy. The secret is to start small.

By Paul Moreland

THE ROUND REJECTION of John McCain indicates that George W. Bush's nation-building fell far short of the Shadransky ideal. The prospects for christening the Shining City on the Hindu Kush by Jan. 20, 2009—or Jan. 20 of any year—seem less than promising.

Granted, a let's-do-it-while-we-can attack on Iran would provide visceral release in certain quarters, but Iran is a nation already built and notably uneager to be rebuilt. Odds are that an assault on Tehran would be another one for the boondoggle column—a poor nostrum for the most fragile legacy since James Buchanan's.

Yet if we stay the course for another few weeks, GWB will forever be known as the failed nation-builder—the cowboy who rode into town, shot it up, and left. He needs one last riposte to balance things out.

While democracy is said to rest on universal principles, thus far President Bush's beau ideal has involved force-feeding freedom to recalcitrant Muslims. For one willing to challenge paradigms on the quick, however, a new frontier exists. The limitless mystery of the Amazon offers the nation-builder's equivalent of 72 virgins.

Deep within the Peruvian rainforest, the crew of an NBC reality show recently discovered a lost Indian tribe. These Indians—the Jururei—present Mr. Bush with perfect opportunity to add a solid win to his democratization score sheet.

We know little of the Jururei, but what we have learned is chilling. Far from passing the Town Square Test, these

fierce people are wholly undemocratic. The tribe's current leadership commits human-rights violations against their own people, neighboring tribes, and even the Western loggers introducing modernity from atop bulldozers.

The Jururei are led by one Sopai, a thuggish Amazonian headman. French anthropologists report that Sopai did not earn his leadership through free and fair elections, but seized power by cudgeling his predecessor to death. The common Jururei—fundamentally decent monkey trappers and tuber gatherers—are utterly disenfranchised.

When encamped, the peripatetic tribe resides within a single roundhouse called a *shabono*, in which deep divisions exist. While all Jururei adhere to the same basic form of animism, a schism has arisen between the majority, which holds the traditional belief that departed ancestors return as birds, and a minority that believes they become howler monkeys. Sopai, a fervent traditionalist, has excluded the minority faith from the tribal council and has ordered them to sleep on the jungle side of the *shabono*, where they fall prey to snakes and panthers.

Sopai's oppression of his people doesn't end with religious minorities. In this Amazonian human-rights crisis, women and sexual minorities fare no better. Previous headmen, bending to domestic pressure, permitted women to assume lucrative roles in hunting parties. Sopai immediately banned this practice. For the few women who retain hunter privileges, a thatched ceiling exists: on average, they keep just 68 percent of the