

Democratic Dominion

The decline and fall of the Virginia Republican Party

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

FORMER CHAIRMAN of the Virginia Republican Party Patrick McSweeney says he “knew [his] party had a long-term problem when [he] watched Mark Warner on ‘Meet the Press’” in 2004. The Democratic governor was being questioned on his proposed \$2 billion tax increase, one that would make up for budget shortfalls left by his Republican predecessor, Jim Gilmore. McSweeney noted that normally “this would be a great opportunity for Republicans” to paint Warner as a tax-and-spend liberal. But Virginia’s Senate Republicans had squandered that chance when they proposed their own solution—a \$3.7 billion tax increase, nearly double Warner’s. The Democratic governor turned to Tim Russert and said, “Heck, we’ve got the Republican Senate now. I’m the conservative alternative.”

It was a line that Warner would use over and over throughout the state, and one that made McSweeney boil. “We did it to ourselves,” he says ruefully.

What Republicans did was forfeit all their advantages in the Old Dominion. Republican presidential candidates have won Virginia in every presidential election for four decades. After the realignment of the 1990s, Republicans handily built majority after majority in both houses of the Virginia General Assembly. And just a decade ago, Republicans occupied the top three statewide offices, the first united administration in Virginia in living memory. Even Democratic congressman Virgil Goode found it advantageous to switch to the GOP as late as 2003.

But all that has changed. Mark Warner was succeeded by his Democra-

tic lieutenant governor, Tim Kaine. In 2006, Jim Webb unseated incumbent Republican senator George Allen. And now, in the race for the U.S. Senate seat of retiring Republican John Warner, Mark Warner is leading Jim Gilmore by a stunning 28 points. John McCain’s lead in the state has evaporated. On Intrade, a futures market for political outcomes, an Obama victory in Virginia commands 81 percent, compared to just 18 for McCain. The maverick may distinguish himself as the first Republican presidential candidate to lose Virginia since Barry Goldwater. How did Republicans lose so much so quickly in Virginia?

There are well-rehearsed demographic reasons for Republican decline. Northern Virginia has seen an influx of transplants from blue states in the last 15 years. The subsequent suburban and exurban development in Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William counties precipitated even greater demographic change. In 2000, Hispanics made up just 9 percent of the population of Prince William County. By 2005, nearly one in five residents there was Hispanic. This doubling of the Hispanic population during the first half of this decade was reflected throughout the region.

But conservatives can still win statewide elections, even in the transformed north. Mark Tate, a former mayor of Middleburg and a longtime Republican activist, admits that in this region, sustained anti-government rhetoric is a hard sell when so many residents are employed by the federal government. “Just look at where they work,” Tate laughs. But, he says, “Republicans up here are issue voters. Some rally around

the life issue, some on gun issues, others on immigration, and increasingly we’re seeing Real ID folks.” Electoral results seem to prove Tate’s theory that social-issues voters can give Republicans victory.

George Allen’s loss to Jim Webb is instructive. Republicans in Virginia had timed an anti-gay-marriage amendment to coincide with Allen’s re-election campaign. Bob Marshall, a Republican state delegate, had written the bill hoping to elevate an issue he cared about while helping his party. But according to Marshall, “Allen did nothing with it. He didn’t link himself to it at all ... because Republican consultants who were running his campaign are so afraid of the social issues.” Allen lost by less than 10,000 votes. Despite its lowered profile, the anti-gay-marriage amendment received almost 160,000 votes more than Webb.

Marshall has represented a district that encompasses parts of Loudoun and Prince William Counties in the Virginia House of Delegates since the early ‘90s. And he remains one of the most conservative members of that body. He has opposed pro-amnesty members in his own party and, true to his pro-life convictions, he objected to the distribution of the morning-after pill on state university campuses. Marshall ran to Gilmore’s right in the last Republican Senate primary, criticizing the former governor for sitting on the board of Barr Labs, which makes the abortion-inducing pills. Though Marshall was outspent nearly 14 to one, he worked up strong support in his region of the state and lost the nomi-

nation by just 65 votes. Privately, Mark Warner acknowledged that the real enthusiasm at the Republican convention was for Marshall, not Gilmore. “Why would the base fight for Gilmore, when he doesn’t fight for them?” Marshall asks. “Without them, you can’t win.”

But there are other reasons Republicans are losing ground in Virginia’s exurbs. It turns out that exurban voters—the ones David Brooks memorably characterized as “Realtor Mom” and “Patio Man”—hate mismanagement. On this score, the Bush years have been a disaster for Republicans. Bush carried Fairfax County in 2000, and in 2002, Brooks wrote confidently that the exurbs were “generally the most Republican areas of the country.” But two years later, Bush lost that same county to Kerry, and Democrats like Kaine and Webb captured further-flung counties for Democrats in the two years after that.

Robert Lang, a demographer at Virginia Tech’s Metropolitan Institute in Alexandria, recently told the *Washington Post*, “What’s damaged Republicans with Patio Man is the basic incompetence of government.” Lang said that these voters are holding Republicans responsible for the situation in Iraq, for failures after Hurricane Katrina, and, most importantly, for the economic downturn that is draining value from their properties. Exurban voters haven’t changed ideologically, but they are protesting the current GOP leadership. “The Democrats don’t own these people—it’s about the state of the Republican Party,” said Lang.

By choosing Gilmore to run against Warner in the 2008 Senate race, Republicans were doubling down on incompetence, while providing nothing to social conservatives. In 1997, then Attorney General Gilmore beat Lt. Gov. Don Breyer in the gubernatorial race by appealing to conservatives and moderates on fiscal issues. Gilmore opposed Virginia’s unpopular car tax. Social con-

servatives were only mobilized when Breyer unnecessarily attacked Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition. Republicans John Hager and Mark Earley rode his coattails into the lieutenant governor and attorney general offices respectively.

But Gilmore’s phase-out of the car tax proved disastrous. The unpopular levy acted as a source of revenue for localities, so Gilmore promised to offset their losses with reimbursements from state coffers. Municipalities with many or expensive cars got huge rebates, even as state revenues shrank dramatically after Sept. 11, 2001. This set the stage for Warner to raise taxes and laid even more traps for Republicans on budgetary issues long after Gilmore left office.

Marshall calls out fellow Republicans like Virginia House Speaker William Howell for “campaigning as an anti-tax candidate” while helping to negotiate the creation of the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority, an unelected body that would be able to levy taxes to pay for road-building and Metro upkeep. “This isn’t conservative and it isn’t taking responsibility. This is like saying Pontius Pilate is our patron saint,” Marshall says. The Virginia Supreme Court eventually struck down the bill as unconstitutional.

After the car-tax fiasco and Howell’s gambit on transportation taxes, Virginia Republicans had effectively discarded their advantages on fiscal issues. Add to this the widespread feeling of abandonment among social conservatives, and the party was set for a total wipeout. With Republicans ceding more and more ideological ground, Warner sounded plausible telling voters that he was the fiscal conservative. Webb gingerly appealed to immigration restrictionists.

Now no issue is safe for Republicans. McSweeney reports seeing internal Republican polls that show normally bright-red districts like Hampton Roads—which has facilities for all four

branches of the military—overwhelmingly prefer Democrats on foreign policy. A late September Mason-Dixon poll had McCain’s lead in Hampton Roads within the margin of error. Marshall says that even his conservative constituents wonder “why we’re building an embassy the size of the Vatican in Iraq.”

The foibles of the national party had retiring moderate Virginia Republican Rep. Tom Davis declaring, “if we were a dog food, they would take us off the shelf.” McSweeney is just as pessimistic: “I can’t think of one initiative of the Bush White House that has helped us. Not one.”

While the trouble for the GOP in Virginia has unique characteristics—Gilmore’s defective personality, George Allen’s “macaca” moment, and ineffective House leadership—it is impossible to write off the trends that have been driving Republican decline as isolated to Virginia. The demographic changes in Northern Virginia resemble those in many other swing states such as Florida and Colorado. The careers of Jim Gilmore and George Allen mirror the fortunes of Ohio’s Bob Taft Jr. and Mike DeWine. In each state, a reluctance to connect with social conservatives and rank incompetence scuttled the ambitions of a Republican governor and senator.

The problems with the national party that make Warner’s sure victory over Gilmore so dramatic—the unpopularity of the war, dissatisfaction with the economy, and gas prices—affect every contested Senate race. Republicans are set to lose incumbent senators not only in purple states like New Hampshire and Colorado but normally deep-red states like North Carolina and Arkansas. As Republicans on the national level absorb another “thumpin’” in the House, and potentially lose their power to filibuster in the Senate, they would be wise to learn from McSweeney’s analysis: “We did it to ourselves.” ■

The Right to Remain Silent

Conservatives don't need a movement—and the best have no use for one.

By Austin W. Bramwell

THAT CONSERVATISM is in crisis is widely acknowledged. Some say that the movement has forsaken its principles; others that it has been corrupted by power; still others call for ideological renovation. All share the conviction that the crisis calls for a high-minded conversation as to the meaning of conservatism. To the contrary, in my view, the answer to the crisis—if there is a crisis—lies in ending that conversation altogether.

Until recently, few thought of conservatism as a worthy subject of inquiry. Most simply accepted the lexical understanding of conservatism as resistance to change. Only with the founding of that set of bureaucracies and sources of funding that became known as “conservative” did the debate as to the meaning of conservatism begin. Since then, nearly every treatment of conservatism has aimed at convincing, galvanizing, or scandalizing a movement audience.

Apparent exceptions only prove the rule. Michael Oakeshott, for example, characterized conservatism as a mere disposition—a theory that negates the very possibility of a conservative “movement.” But Oakeshott wrote precisely in reaction to the more ideological understandings of conservatism like those the movement was beginning to develop in America. The conservative movement continues to pay lip service to Oakeshott, but his theory of conservatism, if accepted, would fatally undermine the rationale for having a movement in the first place. The practical, “cash value” of every other theory of conservatism is that the movement should pursue this or that set of goals and not others.

In short, conservatism is not a philosophy or approach to political affairs that inspires the set of institutions known as the conservative movement. Rather, the conservative movement is a set of institutions that inspires the ideology known as conservatism. In the absence of a movement, the felt need to develop a coherent understanding of conservatism would evaporate.

Of course, the movement is not going anywhere and debates as to the meaning of conservatism will continue. Suppose, however, one agrees with this or that position closely associated with the movement. Does it follow that one should engage in movement-building activities? No. Non-movement conservatives have arguably done more to advance conservative ideas and without the burden of fitting them into an ideological system or wondering how they may affect their standing within an ideological movement.

A non-movement conservative by definition has no meaningful affiliation with movement conservative institutions. He may not even care whether others call him a “conservative.” (Indeed, movement conservatives may be quick to denounce him.) But that needn't limit his influence. On the contrary, consider the impact of these notable non-movement conservatives going back to the era of the movement's founding.

Joseph Schumpeter. Austrian by birth, Schumpeter wrote his famous *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* while a professor at Harvard. It stands out as the greatest (if also the most elliptical) defense of capitalist, European civiliza-

tion ever penned. Movement conservatives often take credit for the (partial) triumph of free-market ideas, but Schumpeter did more than anyone to persuade American leaders to preserve the capitalist system (to say nothing of the sort of semi-feudal, mixed constitution that he favored).

Jane Jacobs. When Jacobs wrote *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, urban planners, flush with federal dollars and enamored of modernist designs, were obliterating old neighborhoods in favor of thruways and high-rise apartment complexes. They never bothered to study how communities actually work. Jacobs did. The unplanned order of old buildings, mixed uses, and formal conventions, Jacobs argued, protects people from danger and makes decent lives for them possible. Urban renewal, by contrast, was immiserating its intended beneficiaries by depriving them of the organic features of real neighborhoods.

Tom Wolfe. Radical Chic, Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers, the Me Decade, the Right Stuff: Wolfe invented the very vocabulary for interpreting the carnival of American culture. He has exposed the degeneration of the civil-rights movement into race hustling, the moral one-upsmanship of wealthy liberals, and the vaporous egotism of contemporary religiosity. For every ballyhooed reform, Wolfe has shown the hypocrisy and cruelty beneath.

Jacques Barzun. The centegenarian polymath is probably the most civilized man alive. You can infer his politics from