

# The Decade of the Great Republican Death Wish

*In the early '80s, Republicans were the party of ideas with the issues, the voters, and the future on their side. Conrad cartoons pictured the Democrat donkey not as a vanishing species, but as already extinct. But through assiduous effort, in ten short years the GOP has managed to annihilate its advantages, destroy its coalition, and restore the donkey to health and power.*

by John Kurzweil

*"What all the wise men promised has not happened, and what all the damned fools predicted has come to pass."*

— Lord Melbourne, Queen Victoria's First Prime Minister

REASON MAGAZINE used to send out (and for all I know, still does) a subscription solicitation posing the question: "How much of what you know is wrong?" An old political hand and friend of mine to whom I repeated the question answered, without hesitation, "considering what I know, I hope most of it." As one of those damn fools, those cavemen, those nincompoops (as so many wise men named us) who predicted Republican disaster following the abandonment of Ronald Reagan's formula for conservative politics by Pete Wilson, George Bush, and even by Reagan himself too often during his presidency, I admit I hoped that what I at least *thought* I knew *was* wrong. For instance, in late summer 1991, after the \$8 billion exercise in "pragmatism" that even Wilson himself now calls a "mistake," I hoped I was overstating matters when I wrote the following. Alas, I was not.

The tax issue has been taken off the board as a GOP weapon against Democrats in California. *They* emerged fully willing and able to continue bashing Wilson and his Party as water carriers for fat cats, as insensitive to the plight of the poor, the downtrodden, and so forth. Wilson's compromises, meanwhile, implicitly conceded much of the Democrats' arguments while making it almost impossible to re-focus the political debate on the policy question between bloated government and the right of the people to keep what they earn. Who will believe a Republican candidate playing that tune now? A campaign theme of first-term Assemblyman Paul Horcher last year was that Horcher would be the "last" Republican to vote for a tax increase. After he gave the governor's budget its 54th "aye" vote to put it over the top, former supporters in his San Gabriel Valley district may be comforted to know that Horcher is a man of his word.

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In addition, Wilson's Party — its office holders, the members of its Central Committee, its volunteer organizations, its statewide membership — is split down the middle, and not over some transitory quibble but over an issue that goes to the heart of the GOP's motivating and defining idea. Wilson has opened a Republican War of the Roses that promises to be long, vicious, and characterized by inconclusive outcomes .... For a while at least, California Republican politics is likely to be characterized more by internecine blood-letting than by attacks on the Democrats. What cause or leader remains to rally and unify the troops? Wilson's early months in office have defined him in many Republican minds not as their



champion against the common enemy but as the leader of a faction within the Party determined to smash his internal opponents while compromising with Democrats.

AS I WRITE, word comes that Speaker Willie Brown has named Horcher top Republican on the powerful Assembly Ways and Means Committee, ignoring the GOP caucus's choice for the post, Dean Andal, and showing once more that Brown knows something about exploiting his adversaries' weaknesses. And as the November elections proved, the California Republican Party is, if anything, even more confused about its purpose and, thus, incapable of unifying or winning than I



thought it was. What I knew *was* wrong: I underestimated the damage Wilson had done.

Of course, Wilson did not act alone. The November 1992 catastrophe was the work of many hands. It began building shortly after 1980, the year the Republican Party seemed on the verge of sweeping all before it. I recall a Paul Conrad cartoon from that time showing a series of skeletons, as in an archeological museum, the first two or three bearing labels such as "Tyrannosaurus," "Brontosaurus," and "Triceratops." The last extinct skeleton — a donkey — was labeled "Democratic Party." One of Reagan's earliest and bitterest foes, Conrad accurately conveyed the mood of the time.

In 1980, Republicans had taken not only the White House and the U.S. Senate but, much more important, the GOP had captured the imagination of the country. Republicans were people with ideas and the competence to get things done. They were the party of the future, of optimism about that future and about an America whose best days were ahead, not behind, as Carter and the rest of the Democrats seemed to think. Even beyond our borders, the whole world seemed suddenly to

be moving toward freedom and democracy, toward, that is, an emulation of America — and not the Democrats' America mired in malaise and self-doubt, but the Republicans' free, booming, optimistic, *conservative* America. Coming only six years after Watergate, five years after the fall of Saigon, and immediately after the Carter era's malaise and retreat from the world, this transformation, and the accomplishment it represented, was monumental. The Democrats' popular base had disintegrated. Their hold on power was institutional, secured through unelected judges, gerrymanders, and the advantages of incumbency, all of which would decay with the passage of time. The issues, the ideas, the voters, and, thus, the future belonged to the GOP, and even Conrad knew it.

What he didn't know, and what liberals never seem able to grasp, is what had brought about the change. Reagan's election as president capped a 16-year career of dumbfounding one establishment political figure after another, from George Christopher and William Penn Patrick (in California's 1966 GOP gubernatorial primary) to Pat Brown, Jesse Unruh, and Jimmy Carter (and, later, Walter Mondale), all of whom wrote him off as a lightweight right-wing ideologue, and an actor to boot, and all of whom were amazed, bitter, and uncomprehending (with the possible exception of Unruh) after he trounced them in elections they felt they could not lose. The key to understanding the 28-year rise and fall of the state and national Republican Party, from 1964 to 1992 — and to its resurgence, if it is to have one — lies in the at-once obvious and, yet, to so many inexplicable and vexing popularity and success of Ronald Wilson Reagan.

THROUGHOUT HIS political career, Reagan kept a small plaque on his desk bearing the inscription: "There is no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he doesn't mind who gets the credit." I was reminded of this sentiment during the 1991 budget battles when I asked Dan Schnur of the governor's staff about the charge that Wilson was thinking more about running for president than about governing California or leading the state Party. Schnur answered that if Wilson wanted to be president, he was smart enough to know he would have to be a successful governor, neatly reversing, I thought, the point of Reagan's plaque: *there is no limit to the credit a man can claim if he doesn't mind doing a little good along the way.*

This Wilson version of the saying sets matters out much more in keeping with the preferences of most pol-

iticians of either party. It restores Wilson, Wilson's interests and Wilson's ambitions, to the center of the equation. This is the language modern politicians understand. What made Reagan so baffling to the insiders, and simultaneously so appealing to the voters, was the (for a politician) revolutionary notion that something, some interest, exists in the world besides his own colossal ego. Even more, Reagan's saying actually implies that the impulse to put oneself first, not only in politics but in any endeavor, is the chief barrier to getting things done. If you want to accomplish something, first free yourself from the narrow confines of your own self-

ish ego and the limits will be off. The reactions of the professionals encountering this strange man with this bizarre notion are invariably hilarious. Their mouths drop open. After a moment they commence pouring forth condescending drivel, displaying a complete inability to comprehend the simple thing Reagan is about along with an air of supreme superiority and disdain. Lyn Nofziger relates a characteristic instance in his autobiography, *Nofziger*:

My memories of the 1966 campaign start with my talk with Bill Roberts after coming back from an early trip with Reagan. "There's something out there," I said. "I don't know

## Jacobin "Moderation" and the Great Republican Death Wish

THE CENTERPIECE of the "moderate" plan to save the Republican Party is the banishment of religion, especially the Christian religion, and, worst of all, invocations of the authority of God, from our politics lest we violate America's tradition of pluralism and fatally compromise the Republican Party's defining dedication to individual freedom. This ignores, of course, the fact that the roots of both American pluralism and our respect for freedom are religious, and that without religion — specifically Western civilization's Judeo-Christian moral code and tradition — we would enjoy *neither* our pluralism *nor* our freedom. The effort not only to separate but to place at odds religion and freedom has led to a more or less schizophrenic demand that religion be banned, in effect, because our Judeo-Christian tradition of tolerance demands it. This undermining of the very principle invoked thus serves neither freedom nor religion but, perversely, opens the door to tyranny (and, incidentally, the abolition of the GOP).

Religion has been the central force throughout Western history advancing the freedom and interests of the individual against tyranny, as the so-called moderates deprecating it now would learn if they bothered looking into a history book once in awhile, or maybe just read a speech or two by Abraham

Lincoln, a man Tom Campbell would hound out of the party. The matter was discussed eloquently by John Courtney Murray — a "gasp!" Jesuit priest — in *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (1960):

The first truth to which the American Proposition makes appeal is stated in that landmark of Western political theory, the Declaration of Independence. It is a truth that lies beyond politics; it imparts to politics a fundamental human meaning. I mean the sovereignty of God over nations as well as over individual men. This is the principle that radically distinguishes the conservative Christian tradition of America from the Jacobin laicist tradition of Continental Europe. The Jacobin tradition proclaimed the autonomous reason of man to be the first and the sole principle of political organization. In contrast, the first article of the American political faith is that the political community, as a form of free and ordered human life, looks to the sovereignty of God as to the first principle of its organization.

In the Jacobin tradition religion is at best a purely private concern, a matter of personal devotion, quite irrelevant to public affairs. Society as such, and the state which gives it legal form, and the government which is its organ of action are by definition agnostic or atheist. The statesman as such cannot be a be-

liever, and his actions as a statesman are immune from any imperative or judgment higher than the will of the people, in whom resides ultimate and total sovereignty (one must remember that in the Jacobin tradition 'the people' means 'the party'). This whole manner of thought is altogether alien to the authentic American tradition.

THE JACOBIN mode is the traditional mode of the tyrannical left precisely because, when God is dead, no authority remains to prohibit or to permit any practice. The lid is off. That is why anti-religion is advanced so strongly by such left-wing entities as the American Civil Liberties Union, People for the American Way, and, since 1972 especially, those who pull the strings in the national Democratic Party. It is a suicidal position for Republicans and, for that matter, Americans to assume, as last November's elections attest. The Republican Party came into being precisely because no party, at the time, was standing against the Jacobin relativism that proclaimed some men slaves and some free, implicitly denying the authority of God invoked by Jefferson when he wrote that "all men are created equal." This religious proposition is the *sine qua non* of the Republican Party. Without it, the Party serves no purpose and will, therefore, cease to exist.

— John Kurzweil



what it is but there's something between Reagan and the people. He's going to be elected governor and someday he might even be president."

Bill looked at me pityingly with his big bulgy blue eyes. He must have wondered what kind of a naive nut he had hired.

"Oh Lyn," he remarked, "what will the poor soul do if he's ever elected governor!"

It was easy to see that Reagan had never inspired any great feeling of confidence in Bill Roberts. Bill was a good day-to-day campaign manager, as good as anyone I've ever known, maybe better. But like a lot of moderate Republicans he looked on Reagan as a not very smart right-wing actor.

How many times down the years would such scenes be repeated by the George Christophers, Pat Browns, and Jimmy Carters, the John Seares, the Bakers (both Jim and Howard), and Richard Darmans, by countless grizzled old veteran reporters and editors in report after report and editorial after editorial, by captains of industry, heads of unions, Czars of this or that vast bureaucracy, learned professors and distinguished citizens of every stripe and variety: always the same initial astonishment at this weird spectacle, Reagan, and then the same dumb, uncomprehending condescension. All of them endlessly talking, in public, about the central importance of the common good and the need for selfless public servants, all equally certain in private that that is the last thing anybody really wants, and then aghast when a man actually appears trying, imperfectly and falteringly but nonetheless sincerely trying, to consider something besides himself in the course of his public duties. It is as if Diogenes, coming finally to the end of his age-long search for an honest man, unexpectedly stumbles across him but then, rather than rejoicing, instead bursts out laughing and wanders off shaking his head at the poor fool's doddering naivete and irrelevance.

THE IMPLICATION of Schnur's answer regarding Wilson's presidential ambitions was that no contradiction existed between the interests of the people and those of the governor. Of course Wilson would do his best for everyone; what better way to advance toward his presidential goal? But, on the contrary, Western political history is almost exclusively a story of the inher-

ent conflict between the interests of the ruled and those of the rulers. Most of what is generally considered political progress during the last, say, 1,000 years has consisted of taming the appetite of those in power for treating public office as personal property. Reagan repeatedly distinguished between the presidency and individual presidents, underscoring the Western conception of the

ruler as one entrusted by the people with *authority*, not personal power, to be exercised in *their* name and in *their* interest. The struggle to establish and maintain this distinction has a long history: from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, to the Civil War, to all the

political battles of the horrific twentieth century over communism, fascism, nazism, socialism, and all the other spin-off, odd-ball "isms" they have spawned, to the continual growth of state power and the parallel shrinkage of individual freedom and self-reliance, all under the appropriately dishonest label of "liberalism," the issue has always and everywhere been: will the people or their governors be served? Will government function to serve the common good, or will it tyrannically subjugate the people to serve the narrow interests and ambitions of those in power?

For Pete Wilson this issue arose dramatically with the 1991 budget battle. The day he became governor, Wilson walked into a monumental struggle that had raged for decades between the left, whose vision is of government growing ever larger the better, they say, to solve all of life's problems, and those who see government as the chief danger both to freedom and to getting anything constructive done. Wilson, appraising the situation from the point of view not of one who sees himself primarily as the people's agent but rather as a man whose main concern is his desire to be president, found taking up the Republican side in this battle neither convenient nor helpful. He chose to compromise with the Democrats because, just as George Bush had concluded in Washington the year before, he saw that his personal interest lay in clearing this particular item off his desk as quickly as possible. He would then, he thought, be able to turn to matters more to his liking. The myopia of politicians who think first of their personal objectives and only secondarily, as an afterthought, of governing

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well can be gauged by the fact that both Bush and Wilson were probably genuinely astounded at the uproar brought on by their cavalier behavior. Even the *Los Angeles Times'* George Skelton, a man for whom conventional wisdom is more or less all there is, recently noticed that what all the wise men promised back in '91 about the advantages of pragmatism has not happened.

"It was never supposed to be this way," Skelton wrote, surveying the mire rising ever higher toward the governor's throat. Reverting to form, though, Skelton then counsels yet more public relations fluff as the way out of trouble for Pete Wilson — strike an upbeat pose, compromise a little with the left, throw a bone or two to the right, avoid looking too doctrinaire either way.

THAT, OF course, is how Wilson got *into* trouble. The governor seems to believe his difficulties are essentially nothing more than a combination of bad public relations and the obstructionism of jealous Republican rivals. His administration has consisted mainly of a series of P.R. forays portraying him as the guy who can cut through the politics to get things done alongside a private war to cleanse the state Party by destroying those he sees as opponents within it. The millions of Californians who voted for him (especially those thousands of Republicans who worked diligently to elect him) in the naive hope he might address some of *their* concerns once in office now see how small a role they play in his calculations and his public approval ratings plummet. Ignoring all this, however, Wilson plows forward as always. Rather than try to extinguish the firestorm his '91 budget deal set off, for instance, Wilson launched a demolition campaign of breathtaking persistence and thoroughness against his own power base:

- orchestrating a divisive takeover of the Assembly GOP caucus,
- sustaining, even escalating, the ongoing war of words against his Party's conservative base, particularly its religious contingent and their concerns over social issues,

- naming a proven loser with no constituency (but nonetheless a good Wilson man) to his unexpired Senate term,

- draining off millions of dollars of Republican campaign funds contesting primary elections last year in a hopeless, divisive effort to reshape the Assembly caucus in his own image,

- launching a lone wolf campaign to pass a Welfare and Governor's Power Enhancement initiative without checking, as usual, to see if, one, any substantial support for the idea existed or, two, it might backfire by stimulating people to register and vote who stood to lose under its provisions (welfare recipients, for instance), diverting, in the process, another \$3 million that might have gone to GOP candidates,

- skipping his own Party's pre-election convention — perhaps his crowning achievement — again spotlighting divisions over social issues (Wilson disliked the mildly prolife language in the new state Party platform) rather than ignoring the relatively trivial issue of the platform and instead using the convention to crow about having taken on and, in significant ways, beaten the Democrats during the 1992 budget battle ("Had he done that," Assemblyman Gil Ferguson told me, "he could have ridden 'round the floor on the delegates' shoulders"), and

- spending yet more election campaign dollars in November on Wilsonite Republican long-shot candidates who lost resoundingly while conservatives were losing close races around the state.

What accounts for such persistent destructiveness directed against one's own party, which is to say, ultimately, against oneself? David Horowitz confronted a similar mystery surveying the vast misery and waste leftism creates wherever it goes but which never seems to deter, or even seems to be noticed by, the leftists themselves who relentlessly persevere always proclaiming their one goal to be the good of all humanity.

"I realized," he writes, "that the reason the Idea is so hard to give up [for all its destructiveness] is that a radical faith is like any other faith: It is not a matter of politics but of self.

"The moment I gave up my radical beliefs was the moment I had to look at myself for the very first time. At *me*. As I really was — not suspended above everyone else as an avatar of their salvation but standing beside them as an equal, as one of *them*. Not one whom History had chosen for its vanguard but a speck of ordinary human dust."

I suppose, I hope anyway, that Pete Wilson would blush to think of himself as one whom History had cho-

sen for its vanguard. But his problem is nonetheless the same. The implication of seeing oneself as a speck of ordinary human dust is that all the other specks are every bit as important as, and perhaps in some cases even more important than, oneself. Their lives, their hopes, their interests, therefore, all should be taken into account, especially by one who exercises great power. But this, as we've seen, would distract Wilson from his personal agenda. More importantly, however, it would bring him back down to earth, forcing him to see himself as, again in Horowitz's words, "just a drop in the flow to the common oblivion. Mortal, insignificant, inconceivably small."

THIS IS what real life as an ordinary human being looks like from the perspective of pride: insignificant, inconceivably small. It is the image liberals have of conservatives, which is to say, of people who try to live in the real world rather than in liberalism's egocentric fantasyland. It accounts for their automatic condescension regarding Reagan and all conservatives. And it is Wilson's trouble with conservatism.

But to conservatives, especially Reagan, real life is not at all insignificant. Rather, it is egomania that shrinks one's world to the point of oblivion. If we can just forget about "getting the credit," our eyes will be opened to the world of actual existence. And we will find that it is not such a bad place to live in after all. Nofziger's book recounts a joke Reagan often told which, Nofziger says,

whether or not he knew it, epitomized his own attitude. It was about two little boys — twins — one of whom was a terrible pessimist, the other a confirmed optimist. Their parents called in a child psychiatrist to see if he could bring more balance into their lives.

To cure the pessimist the psychiatrist took him into a roomful of new toys and told him, "They are all yours." The boy burst out crying and, when asked why, wept that the toys might break or be lost or someone might steal them. Nothing could comfort him.

The psychiatrist then took the other twin into a room piled high with horse manure. The kid let out a joyful whoop and began burrowing into the pile. When he was asked what he was doing he replied, "With all this manure, there has to be a pony in here somewhere."

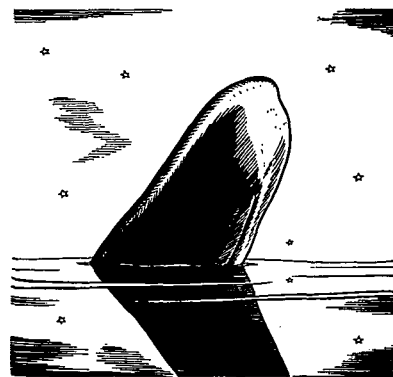
Reagan is like that kid. He always figures there's a pony in there somewhere.

Those considering Reagan and his rapport with the people often stop at this point: that he exudes optimism and the American people like that, but this is only the

beginning of the answer. It ignores the obvious question: optimism about what? Reagan's optimism is mainly an intense, undiminished good feeling about this nation, its history, its institutions, its people, and even its future. It is, essentially, an optimism about the American idea, which is that it is better to live in the real world, shouldering its burdens, accepting its challenges, sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing, but always going on, than it is to quit, seeking excuses for failure while sinking into delusion, toward slavery and death. Reagan retained America's traditional optimism about real life, which is what a lot of people have lost who, for that reason, cannot understand him or his appeal. It is a good measure, for that matter, of the degree to which pessimism has taken hold that Reagan's idea — the idea that motivated most of the men and women who founded this country — should seem weird, obtuse, and incomprehensible to most of those running it today. George Bush, with his talent for encapsulation, called it "the vision thing," displaying for the ages the sheer bewilderment that optimism about anything beyond ego inspires in most politicians for whom public life long ago ceased being about anything more than piling up credits — resume points — to provide a springboard for the next career leap.

That succumbing to this fantasy is suicidal, quickly for Republicans, more slowly, but no less surely, for America, was demonstrated by the collapse of the Republican majority that began almost immediately after Reagan's 1980 election to the presidency.

REAGAN'S FIRST year in office was one of stunning change and victory for the people, crowned by the amazing spectacle of Congress actually passing a 25 percent tax cut, just as though something besides their own power actually mattered. The cut, in effect, really only repealed part of the massive tax increases of the Jimmy Carter years. Even so, the result of this relatively minor vote of confidence in America's heritage of freedom proved so powerful, like water in the desert, that it set off a seven-year economic boom. Of vastly greater importance, however, is that it set the tone for the nation — Reagan's



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# CONSERVATIVE ADVANCES OF 1992

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If the Election Was So Bad For Conservatives,  
Why is Willie Brown Spitting Nails?

by

CHRISTOPHER SHELTON

IN SPITE of the general GOP wreckage covering the political landscape after last November's election, conservatives are much better off in California as 1993 dawns than we were just one year ago. First and foremost, the idea that Pete Wilson will be able to "reshape" the Republican Party into his own moderate and issueless image is shattered.

As we'll talk about further on, Wilson's agenda for 1993 and 1994 needs to be personal survival, not party purges. In order to have any chance at survival he will need to leave to others (Tom Campbell comes to mind) his crusade of cleansing all trace of morals, ethics, or philosophy from the GOP. Wilson desperately needs the support of the Republican rank and file. Even those who might be old fashioned enough actually to believe that "ideas have consequences," and that the Reagan/Bush/Deukmejian successes were a result of firm stands on (gasp!) ideology.

In addition to Wilson being preoccupied with saving his own skin and thereby having less time to "remake the Republican Party as if 1964 never happened" (an actual quote from a highly placed Wilsonite), conservatives can take heart that there are six to eight new aggressive conservatives in the Assembly (the exact number will be clearer after we've seen them in action for awhile). Bernie Richter and Larry Bowler in the Sacramento area, Kathleen Honeycutt from the high desert, Bill Hoge from Pasadena, Ray Haynes from Riverside, Curt Pringle from Orange County and Bill Morrow from San Diego are all new conservative voices in the lower chamber. They join stalwart holdovers like Pat Nolan, Ross Johnson, Mickey Conroy, Dick

Mountjoy, Paula Boland, Andrea Seastrand and Dean Andal to form the enriched uranium of conservative thought, ideas and action in the state Legislature. (The state Senate, for now, is a hopeless case.)

The first item of business of the newly elected GOP Assembly members was to bounce out of office Bill Jones and his pro-Wilson moderate team of Assembly GOP "leaders." These new conservative legislators are a group of exceptionally talented and savvy conservatives. With the guidance and experience of the conservative greybeards, they will have an immediate impact.

The new Assembly Republican leader is Jim Brulte from the Ontario-Pomona area. Brulte is an astute tactician, who combines a strongly conservative philosophy with an affable personal manner that allows him to negotiate even thorny matters successfully. It is often not appreciated how much personalities take precedence over substance when the "nitty gritty" of negotiations take place in Sacramento. In addition to his own skills, Brulte has assembled around him close advisors such as Ross Johnson, Dick Mountjoy, and Pat Nolan, all of whom have track records of successful operations against the Democrats — both frontal attacks and guerilla operations.

ASSEMBLY SPEAKER Willie Brown has shown he agrees that Brulte and his team have the capacity of being effective — Brown has been vindictive, petty, and tyrannical (even for him!) in dealing with the new GOP leadership. What Brown fears most is a principled, effective Republican leadership. His arrogance and lack of cooperation with Brulte, *et. al.*, is all the confirmation Republicans should need that they made the right decision for leader.

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