

Post-Lungren Trauma

by
**Arnold
Steinberg**

A few days after his funeral, former Los Angeles County Sheriff Sherman Block received 39 percent of the vote. "Have you ever worked for a dead candidate?" one reporter had asked me. "For many," I said, pausing to his astonishment, "... Republicans." Still, it was painful to watch Dan Lungren's moribund 30-million dollar campaign in California.

Consider Los Angeles County, which has a quarter of the state's voters. Sheriff Block, 74, in his grave, running for re-election there, ran 86,000 votes ahead of Lungren, 52.

Can we learn from a brain dead campaign? Party conservatives say Lungren favored "pale pastels" over Ronald Reagan's bold colors. Party pragmatists say Lungren's prolife position doomed him. Both sides agree Republican campaigns in California are even more incompetent than elsewhere. Whatever happened, the "Lungren effect" helped re-elect Boxer, cost the Republicans nearly every statewide office, and resulted in a five-

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seat loss in the state Assembly.

The problem starts in Washington. Republicans in Congress believed the Contract for America (which was a plus) was entirely responsible for their ascendancy in 1994. They mistook political reaction (against Clinton) for philosophical change. That same year, they thought Pete Wilson won the election in California. His opponent, Kathleen Brown, who changed her theme and slogan about every 10 days, had lost it. In 1994, the Wilson campaign went beyond supporting Proposition 187, which limited public funds for illegal immigrants, with needlessly inflammatory ("they just keep coming") television spots. Enter 1996, when the national Party

poured many millions into Dole's campaign here, even in the closing weeks, when his considerable loss was certain. Their churning actually increased Democrat turnout, while the state Party's diversion of funds from legislative races cost the Republicans control of the Assembly.

Of course, an early and principled embrace of the anti-preference Proposition 209 would have helped Republicans. Instead the Party's clumsy last-minute exploitation of the measure, tying it to a suspect Proposition

187 and an unpopular Dole, not only hurt Republican candidates but also cut 10 points from 209's landslide. And now, this year, in the June primary, Republicans hastily nationalized Pete Wilson's Proposition 226 ("paycheck protection") but never explained it to California voters. Its 50 point lead (!) predictably evaporated. Its collapse provided unions with a \$25 million primary election exercise in voter turnout, to prepare them for defeating Republicans in November.

In Washington, success had made Republicans act like Democrats. Out of power so long, they rejoiced in the spoils of victory. Instead of challenging corporate welfare, they became part of it. In the process, they denied themselves the populist appeal that Republicans need. In the worst of both worlds, press coverage savaged Republicans for doing things that were never done (like eliminating the National Endowment for the Arts). Voters awarded Gingrich high negatives for talking like a right wing ideologue. But his actions left conservatives restless. Remarkably, Gingrich disappointed conservatives *and* alienated moderates.

Here in California, Clinton seemed to get credit for the accomplishments of a Republican Congress. Given the caricature of Gingrich, Gray Davis spent millions of dollars on television spots that proclaimed "Lungren's record in Congress is to the right of Newt Gingrich." In contrast, California Congressmen David Dreier, Chris Cox, and Jim Rogan all have a moderate temperament and an appealing personality. With an engaging television presence, they could reach beyond a conservative base. But with Republican control of the House, these potential candidates passed up the chance to run for U.S. senator or governor. (Ironically, Rogan nearly lost in his own district due to the Lungren effect.)

A long time ago I helped elect Jim Buckley to the United States Senate. Like Dreier, Cox, and Rogan, he impressed voters as someone seeking a common ground among people of good will. He was endorsed by newspapers that publicly disagreed with him on the issues but found him a charming man who was willing to listen. Leftist Tony Lewis wrote a gushing column in the *New*

York Times saying Jim would be a gentleman senator. The thoughtful Buckley won a stunning victory in a three-way race. (Studies showed that Buckley also would have won a two-way race). People will vote for a nice guy.

Dan Lungren is a decent man with many virtues. Humility is not one of them. When Gray Davis spoke about issues, Dan Lungren spoke about himself. Lungren, like many conservative candidates who are not simply confident, but assured, could talk with a moral certainty that offends. These candidates speak of family values in a

way that seems to make single and divorced people, widows and widowers, a little uncomfortable. They appear to espouse moral values in a way that makes people tremble at an expansion of state power. For all the press hype against social issues, it may be as much a *matter of style* as substance. Consider Orange County, the once proud bastion of Republicanism. Here Bob Dornan cost the Party two state legislative seats that overlapped the stolen Congressional seat he sought to regain in a suicidal campaign.

The abortion issue gets a bum rap. America is moving slowly, very slowly, toward a prolife position. But it's not there yet. So, it's easier to sell pro-choice to an electorate that would rather not talk about the issue at all. But electoral success requires Republicans to satisfy, but still go beyond, Christian conservatives.

Pro-choice voters say (in exit polls)

abortion is the reason they vote against a Republican. But if they like a prolife Republican, abortion is not an issue to them. Lungren thought he could defuse his prolife position by saying he was a Catholic. In a 40-second script, in a 30-second spot, entirely devoted to abortion, parental consent was lost in Lungren's frenetic delivery. Abortion became politics, and nothing more. Saying that abortion is not as important as other issues, he then alienated pro-choice and prolife voters.

U.S. Senate nominee Matt Fong, closer to the pro-choice position, still lost. In the process, he also upset everyone on a social issue. He gave \$50,000 to Lou Sheldon's anti-homosexuality crusade, then signed a "gay rights" pledge. He wondered why he looked stupid. An accidental nominee, Fong was solid on defense issues. He had the easiest job in the country: run-

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ning against Barbara Boxer, who has never been photographed with her mouth closed. But Fong wanted to be liked. Properly skeptical of stridently negative campaigning, Fong became a conscientious objector even to "contrast" advertising that would highlight his differences with Boxer. He never engaged her on issues until the closing days. By then, he was defined by brilliantly somber ads, which he countered with a spot featuring his mother. Fong properly complains the Republican Party did not adequately fund him, but would it have mattered? (Other statewide candidates and key legislative races also needed money, because the Party favored Lungren, like Dole two years earlier, despite each man's ineffectual campaign.)

Meanwhile, Lungren continued to run for attorney general. Unfortunately, he was listed on the ballot as running for governor. He told everyone that crime was way down, but he still wanted to talk about it. By the time he started talking about education, it made no difference. Like other Republican candidates, Lungren obsessed about vouchers, when he needed to talk about school choice. Our side needs an off-year major advertising effort by public policy foundations to explain how school choice will help improve public education. Otherwise, at election time, our candidates, in California and elsewhere, play defense. It's another case of Republicans believing they are right on the issues; *ergo*, they should win. But our candidates cannot educate in the closing weeks of a campaign.

Which brings us back to strategy. For Republicans who cannot separate their moral outrage from public policy, political analysis is held hostage. Republicans in Washington believed Monica should be an issue, so they would make her an issue. Republican beltway consultants didn't care that this approach might backfire (even though, as I mentioned earlier, their 1996 California Dole ads actually increased Democrat turnout, costing Republicans control of the Assembly). This time, they would make their commissions on Clinton scandal ads that motivated Democrats more than Republicans. And in

California, his own team defined Lungren very early with a preachy ad on character. The character issue put Lungren on auto pilot to defeat. He would never recover. Indeed, his hard sell made him unconvincing as the state's next chief executive. Of course, no one admits to directing Lungren in the commercials, which lost him votes.

What about turnout? How could Republican "strategists" not realize there would be no Republican bump due to Monica? How could they not see that Democrats, es-

pecially black voters, were circling the wagons to protect Clinton? A sure sign of trouble is when every published poll shows consistent double digit leads for Davis, and Lungren's people attack "liberal" pollsters. The California Republican Party boasts that it spent \$12 million on surveys, focus groups, television and radio advertising, telephone banks, and on eighteen million pieces of mail. Presumably, without all this, only 79 Republicans would have voted in California. The truth is the character issue flopped nationally. And in California, Lungren used it early and often.

Will the California results predict the future? Lungren is 52 years old. He did least poorly among voters older than he is. But among voters younger than he, he was absolutely trounced. It's the "vision thing." Education. With female voters, it's some-

thing more. Style. Women look for a softer sell. They prefer a listener, not a talker. Talk about capital gains cuts all you want, but be sensitive. Even more than men, women want someone who can, as Lyndon Johnson once said, "bring us together." In Dick Riordan's runoff campaign for mayor in 1993, a black primary opponent, Stan Sanders endorsed him. Result? No black votes, but plenty of Jewish votes. The lesson: when you reach out to one minority, you get others, and whites.

Even more than Reagan Democrats and mainstream Republicans, independent voters do not want ideology. Law and order? Republicans struggle with the definition of assault weapons, while law enforcement unions endorse moderate Democrats who promise cops more money. Latinos? Lungren's opposition to Proposition 227, the measure to end bilingual education, only

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confused his own base, with no gain among Latinos, for whom it was socially unacceptable to vote for a man endorsed by Wilson. Latino voters will support a friendly Democrat wrong on social issues over a more *simpatico* Republican. Like the Irish Catholics once drawn to the Democrats, Latino Catholics are drawn to a Party that includes them. Latino Republican legislators just elected can be powerful symbols.

The debacle in California may not be unique if Democrats repeat the formula elsewhere. The Party's left allows the nomination of a law-and-order Democrat who says his priority is education. He plays footsie with big business that wants a winner. Republicans? Lacking a strategy, they obsess with trivia. Like defending secondhand smoke while opposing marijuana for cancer patients. That's a winner.

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'Vote Republican because ... uhm ... err ... well'

CPR's panel of
*independent** experts
sorts through the
electoral disaster.



WILLIAM E. SARACINO

Old sayings and adages — though sometimes irritating — are often also true. The 1998 elections speak to the truth in the old saying that you can't beat somebody with nobody; and you can't beat something with nothing. Nobody and nothing is exactly what the national Republican leadership offered the American people as a reason to vote Republican. Other than the hard core Clinton haters who were going to vote for us anyway, the national GOP message was "Vote Republican because ... uhm ... err ... well ... vote Republican because we say so." That the voters rejected this non-message is actually a tribute to their intelligence. It is also indicative of how

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ideologically sterile and tactically tentative the leaders of the 1994 revolution had become by the fall of 1998.

The media has spent much time harrumphing amongst themselves that the election results represent a repudiation of the conservative agenda. This is silly and patently false on its face — since the conservative agenda was not presented to the voters in any organized fashion. In fact the few GOP bright spots around the electoral map — the brothers Bush; Senators Bunning and Fitzgerald in Kentucky and Illinois; Governors Thompson and Engler in Wisconsin and Michigan — represent the few places where positive conservative ideas (in addition to "throw Bubba and Evita out of the White House")

**Legislative Republican leaders Senator Ross Johnson and Assemblyman Rod Pacheco were invited to participate in this discussion, but were precluded by deadline constraints from doing so. Thus, the panel consists exclusively of experts with no direct stake (as candidates for any office) in this election's outcome.*