

# BETWEEN LITTLE ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

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## What Conservatives Should Learn from Defeat

ADAM MEYERSON

**B**ill Clinton won the presidency not only through George Bush's economic mismanagement, but also because he learned from the mistakes of other Democratic candidates over the past 20 years. In contrast to his predecessors, Clinton campaigned as a champion of middle-class tax relief and economic growth, an opponent of crime and permanent welfare dependency, a church-going Baptist, and an anti-Communist willing to use military force. By focusing on the economy, and combining culturally conservative and culturally radical messages, he won back the Reagan Democrats while commanding the enthusiastic support of environmentalist, feminist, and homosexual activists. Perhaps his biggest strategic coup was his bi-racial coalition: he won the support of northern Catholics and many southern whites without alienating the Democratic base among blacks.

These balancing acts were no accident. They resulted from years of research by smart Democrats who wanted to know why their presidential candidates were losing among middle-class voters, particularly white males in the South and northern suburbs whose families had been stalwarts in the Roosevelt coalition. Strategists such as James Carville and think tanks such as the Progressive Policy Institute crafted a "New Democrat" rhetoric that appealed to the broader middle class.

### Turned-Off Constituencies

It is time for conservatives and Republicans to engage in similar research, and perhaps to craft a "New Republican" rhetoric. Two important constituencies for the GOP and conservatism are turned off now, and it is important to find out why. One is the Ross Perot volunteer army, consisting of tens of thousands of Americans who want to work for fiscal responsibility in Washington but don't think they can do it through the Republican Party or the conservative movement. The second consists of suburban families, particularly in the West, who are yearning for a moral environment in which to raise their children but are frightened by the strong presence of conservative Evangelicals in the Republican Party.

The challenge for conservatives in the first case is to combine the pro-growth, tax-limitation message of

Reagan Republicanism with a program to address the Perot people's concerns about long-term debt and economic decline. In the second case, just as Bill Clinton had to find a way to reach out to whites without alienating blacks, Republicans will have to find a way to retain the enthusiastic support of conservative Evangelicals—an enormous asset for the GOP—without antagonizing the majority of suburbanites.

### Bush's Limited Blame

George Bush is not responsible for most of the problems in the GOP and the conservative movement. As disastrous as his economic and domestic policy was, Bush cannot be blamed for the GOP's loss of the Senate in 1986 in the middle of the Reagan boom, or for the GOP's consistent failure to win even open seats in the House of Representatives since 1980, or, in an age of ticket-splitting, for the 1992 wipeout of the GOP at all levels, including the state legislature, in bellwether California.

The GOP, to be sure, will have a good shot at the White House in 1996 if Clinton dishonors his campaign promises or otherwise stumbles. The next Republican president will be a weak one, however, unless conservatives and the GOP can build a governing majority in the Congress and the nation. Over the long run Congress is principally in charge of domestic policy—even of the Supreme Court, as Robert Bork and the pro-life movement discovered. And the weaknesses of the GOP and conservatism are much more pronounced at the congressional than at the presidential level.

This was shown dramatically in 1992 with the Senate defeats of four attractive, articulate conservatives—Bruce Herschensohn of California, Terry Considine of Colorado, Rod Chandler of Washington, and Bob Kasten of Wisconsin—to opponents (except in Colorado) sharply to the left of them. These are four of the most entrepreneurial states in the country; they are the natural territory of conservative Republicans, and yet the sales pitch isn't working.

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### Reaching Perot's Millions

To connect better with their natural allies in the American people, conservatives will have to refine both their economic and their cultural messages.

Conservatives take justified pride in the economic achievements of the Reagan years. Twenty million new jobs were created between late 1982, when the Reagan tax cuts were kicking in, and spring 1990, when Bush broke his tax pledge. Deregulation led to much more efficient trucking, airline, finance, and telecommunications industries, and strengthened the international competitiveness of the U.S. economy. The top 80 percent of American households enjoyed substantial income gains in the 1980s. For the burgeoning black middle class, it was the greatest period of prosperity ever.

There are two nasty-looking clouds, however, in the blue sky of Reaganomics. One is the rising debt of the federal government—now over \$4 trillion—and the trillions more in unfunded Social Security liabilities. Reagan left office in Fiscal Year 1989 with a budget deficit that was 5 percent of GDP when a surplus that is supposed to be reserved for Social Security is excluded. That was too high for an economy in its seventh year of growth.

The other cloud is the stagnation in labor productivity since the early 1970s. Since real wages depend on productivity, single-income families have been on a treadmill for the past two decades. The amazing growth in family income during the Reagan years came because more mothers and teenagers were working, not because wages were rising. The “seven fat years,” as *Wall Street Journal* editor Robert Bartley has aptly described the Reagan boom, were lean ones for stay-at-home and single moms.

To reach the Perot people, conservatives must offer answers for this rise in debt and stagnation in wages. Income-tax limitation, capital-gains tax cuts, the line-item veto, a balanced-budget amendment, and congressional term limits are all essential ingredients in a conservative economic strategy, but they are not enough to address the concerns of Perot's millions that the long-term fiscal health of the federal government is in jeopardy, and that their children and grandchildren will not enjoy the same job opportunities they did.

Needed as well will be politically attractive arguments for specific program cuts and across-the-board caps on spending; for less costly forms of environmental regulation that will still appeal to the conservationist instincts of the American people; for fundamental reform of a litigation system gone bonkers; and for market-based approaches to job training and re-training that will boost worker productivity. Conservatives, quite frankly, haven't done their homework on these important subjects.

### Don't Tread on Me

The second great challenge for conservatism—retaining the support of conservative Evangelicals without frightening away other natural allies—is more difficult and emotionally charged than the first. Fear of the Christian Right did not cause George Bush's defeat, but it has seriously hurt conservatives and Republicans in congressional and state and local races, especially in the

West. In some cases, this fear results from a bigotry against Evangelicals as virulent as the anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism of a generation ago.


Conservatives cannot and should not walk away from the Christian Right. The cultural message of conservatism must begin with a deep respect for religion—all religions. As they can with so many other religious groups, conservatives can point with pride to the many contributions conservative Evangelicals are making to American life—from Prison Fellowship's work turning convicts into productive citizens, to the pre-natal care and adoption services offered by Christian maternity homes, to Focus on the Family's emphasis on the responsibilities of fathers to their children. The loving families and charitable neighborliness of church-going Evangelicals are models for the nation.

The danger comes from a fear that Evangelicals want to force their morality on everybody else. One of the fundamental liberties of a free society is the right to express one's deepest moral beliefs—including disapproval of behavior one considers wrong. At the same time Evangelicals have to be careful not to tread on two principles cherished by liberal and conservative Americans alike: “Don't tell me how to live my life,” and “Don't impose your religion and morality on my children.”

### Cultural Conservatism for a Free Society

Cultural conservatives have to be careful, for example, that their disapproval of homosexuality not be misinterpreted as persecution or an effort to make the practice unlawful. There is nothing “hateful” about opposing gay rights legislation, fifth-grade textbooks promoting the virtues of homosexuality, or sexual conduct that undermines discipline and morale in the military. Cultural conservatives can make that argument more persuasively if they avoid language such as the Oregon referendum last year that would have declared homosexuality to be “abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse.” There is no reason for government in a free society to make such judgments.

Greater emphasis on school choice would help assuage the fears of secular parents alarmed by attempted “takeovers” of local school boards by Evangelical activists. Choice would give Evangelical parents what they really want—greater control over their children's curricula—without imposing their preferences on anyone else.

The hardest balancing act will be over abortion, because there can be no compromise when it comes to protecting innocent human life. The problem for the pro-life movement is that the majority of Americans, although deeply uncomfortable about abortion, do not yet attribute full personhood to unborn children, particularly not in the first trimester of pregnancy. Until this changes—and the challenge for the pro-life movement is to make it change—the no-exceptions language of the GOP platform is an unrealistic and self-defeating immediate objective, and the pro-life movement would be better served by more incremental goals that will discourage abortion and make it socially unacceptable without, at least for now, making it illegal. 

# READING HIS LIPS

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## How to Tell if Clinton Really Is a New Democrat

EDWIN J. FEULNER JR.

**W**ho would ever have thought that a Republican president closely identified with the Reagan Revolution would fall to a Democratic challenger campaigning against him from the right?

Although George Bush was conservative in his court appointments, his embrace of free trade with Mexico, and most foreign policy questions, on the critical pocketbook issues that matter most to voters, Bill Clinton frequently appeared to be on Bush's right. Clinton was also more at ease with the optimistic "can-do" rhetoric of Ronald Reagan than the man who served for eight years at Reagan's side.

Most of Clinton's specific policy recommendations will fall far short of the conservative ideal. Yet, in the war of the campaign sound bites, it was Clinton who celebrated growth and condemned deficits. In an October 22 Seattle campaign speech, for example, Clinton hit the Bush administration on three fronts: failing to control federal spending, taxing middle-income families into the poorhouse, and bogging the economy down in a morass of new regulations. The theme was repeated over and over as he traveled the country; it was the heart of the Clinton message.

President-elect Clinton convinced voters that he has moved the Democratic Party back into the moderate-center mainstream of American politics—a sharp move to the right for the party of George McGovern, Jesse Jackson, Walter Mondale, and Jerry Brown. As Cleveland City Councilman Mike Polensek told the *Washington Post's* Thomas B. Edsall just a few weeks before the election, "I'm a conservative Democrat and I'm angry because of what's happening in the country." Polensek had voted for Reagan in 1980 and 1984, Edsall noted, and for Bush in 1988. Not this time. The Bush administration lost touch with the Reagan Democrats, and by the millions they returned home to the party of their parents.

It was also the Democratic candidate in 1992, not the Republican, who quoted frequently from Heritage Foundation research. As Clinton told the Seattle crowd: "All they [the Bush administration] know how to do is say the words tax and spend, but look at their record.... It was Mr. Bush who said 'Read my lips' and then signed the second-biggest tax increase on the middle class in

history. Mr. Bush who raised spending higher than any president in the last 30 years. Mr. Bush, according to the conservative Heritage Foundation, who increased regulation on the private sector more than anyone in the last 20 years." All of these charges are true, and all of them have been documented by Heritage and other conservatives.

### The First Test: Personnel

Campaigns are one thing, and governing is quite another. Clinton talked tirelessly during the campaign about "growing the economy." He talked about reforming the welfare system. He expressed his faith in the private sector and free trade. Now he must show that he intends to govern as a "New Democrat" as well. Forgive me if I express a healthy skepticism.

The first important test, of course, will be the men and women he chooses for top policy-making positions in government. Will they be Clinton loyalists, dedicated to the kind of change he promoted during his long association with the Democratic Leadership Council and the Progressive Policy Institute? Or will they be creatures of the Democratic Party establishment, long wedded to the special interests of the left? The choice is his, and the success of his administration probably hangs in the balance.

In the meantime, conservatives—as all Americans—should wish the new president God's speed. After all, as conservatives we see presidential elections as an affirmation of the very best in America's democratic tradition: a great act of faith, hope, and optimism.

### Enduring Conservative Ideas

While an important chapter in the political history of the United States has ended, the beliefs that motivated the Reagan Revolution—in individual freedom, limited government, competitive enterprise, and peace through strength—live on. Conservatives will strongly oppose Clinton when he assaults these principles. We also hope that he will look openly on our policy ideas.

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