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A Republican agenda of real change

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The Republican Party is resurgent. But the last two periods of GOP dominance ended in political disaster. Unless Republicans promote real change — namely limited, constitutional government — they are likely to be sent back to political oblivion again. And deservedly so.

Today Republican candidates are capitalizing on the wave of popular anger over excessive federal spending. Yet they are as responsible as Democrats for America's financial and constitutional crises.

George W. Bush was no fiscal conservative. He presided over a massive increase in federal spending, 54 percent after accounting for inflation. He turned a \$128.2 billion surplus into a \$1.4 trillion deficit. As a percentage of GDP federal outlays went from 18.2 percent to 24.7 percent.

Grant that the Democrats, who seized control of Congress in 2006, share responsibility. But Bush could have vetoed appropriation bills; instead, he actively promoted massive bailouts and ineffective stimulus spending.

Limit the analysis just to when the GOP controlled both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue and the fiscal record remains awful. Between 2001 and 2007 the president and Republican Congresses turned a \$128.2 billion surplus into a \$160.7 billion deficit. They increased real federal spending by 24 percent over the same period. The GOP created the Medicare Drug Benefit without even the pretense of paying for it — in contrast to the Democrats and their misnamed health care “reform” — adding \$13 trillion in unfunded liabilities to Uncle Sam's already enormous debt.

Republicans also increased outlays for most every program. The president and his GOP congressional allies made no effort to cut agencies, reduce outlays, or shrink government in any area. The Republican Congress even set pork-barrel spending records. As a percentage of GDP, federal outlays went from 18.2 percent to 19.6 percent. President Bush & Co. proved that Republicans were as much a part of the spending problem as Democrats.

GOP officials like to talk up the Constitution, but in practice they ignore it whenever convenient. The president said campaign finance “reform” was unconstitutional, but refused to veto the legislation. He led congressional Republicans in nationalizing education policy, federalizing marriage counseling, and taking the tragic case of comatose Terry Schiavo away from Florida state courts.

The Republican Party's greatest constitutional failure was its nearly unanimous assertion that the terrorist strikes of 9/11 effectively suspended the Bill of Rights. The Constitution is not a suicide pact. But the document means little if it does not secure basic liberties.

The government may have required additional authority to confront the threat of terrorism. But that should have meant carefully calibrated expansions of federal powers, with strict accountability to limit abuses. Instead, the Bush administration demanded congressional passage, with no input or even debate, of a pre-cooked package of measures which short-circuited the Fourth Amendment and other fundamental constitutional guarantees. Moreover, the president, with GOP congressional support, insisted on largely unreviewable powers.

Republicans constantly cite the founders, but imagine what those who backed the Bill of Rights would have thought of the claim that the president could order the arrest of an American citizen on American soil and have him be held in solitary confinement — potentially forever. And what the original revolutionaries would have thought of the GOP suggestion that there was no constitutional, congressional, or judicial

limit to the president's war-time powers? Which, given the fact that the "War on Terrorism" may go on forever and that the chief battlefield is the American homeland, means that the president has the powers of an elective dictator if he chooses to wield them.

The GOP also once stood for a foreign policy like that advocated by *candidate* George W. Bush: a humble one. But now most leading Republicans promote a policy of promiscuous intervention, highlighted by defense welfare for populous and prosperous allies and intrusive nation-building elsewhere. This policy requires numerous alliances, a world-spanning base network, permanent force deployments, and a massive military budget, almost as large as the total for the rest of the world combined. Indeed, Washington today spends more in real terms on the military than at any time during the Cold, Korean, and Vietnam Wars despite the lack of serious traditional military threats.

Ironically, while terrorism poses the greatest danger today, it is largely beyond the reach of large-scale conventional forces. In fact, promiscuous intervention increases hostility to America and generates enemies, resulting in more anti-U.S. terrorism.

Yet war has become imprinted into the Republican DNA. President George W. Bush adopted a foreign policy of international social engineering through bombing, invading, and occupying other nations. Today Republican politicians and activists complain that Washington has attacked *too few* countries: Iran, North Korea, and Syria make many GOP hit lists.

Two years ago some Republicans appeared ready to confront nuclear-armed Russia over its war with Georgia, even though the latter's irresponsible demagogic president, Mikhail Saakashvili, actually triggered that conflict. And more than a few GOP policymakers favor treating China, the rising nuclear power, as an inevitable enemy.

Of course, the most enthusiastic ivory tower warriors typically never serve in the military. Far more common than followers of John McCain are clones of Dick Cheney, who justified his five Vietnam War deferments by noting that he "had other priorities." Apparently unlike the 58,000 men who died in that conflict, who by Cheney's terms had nothing useful to do with their lives. It's just a matter of comparative advantage: some people get to decide when America goes to war, while other people get to fight America's wars.

In short, the Republican Party has become an active proponent of the welfare/warfare state. The GOP's differences with the Democratic Party usually have been more of emphasis than substance. The former likes to enrich weapons manufacturers while the latter prefers to pay off social service providers. Republican judicial appointees tend to believe the Constitution has at least some relevance to government today. Democrats usually claim to support civil liberties, though the anti-terrorism policies of the Bush and Obama administration are largely indistinguishable.

If the GOP wants to transform politics and become the governing party, it needs to abandon its statist orientation both at home and overseas. Improvements in the legislative process — incoming Speaker John Boehner has targeted earmarks, proposed that members read the bills they vote on, and criticized the practice of writing legislation in secret — would be worthwhile, but these issues are more symptoms than causes. Moreover, procedural reforms are easy to reverse. It took the 1994 GOP majority just a few years to become more abusive than the previous forty-year Democratic majority.

Nor is changing specific policies enough. The GOP has talked about preserving the Bush tax cuts, reversing Obamacare, and cutting regulations, all to the good. But without a larger vision such efforts are unlikely to result in significant or permanent gains. This failure was evident from President Bush's simultaneous support for cutting taxes and increasing spending. His most important positive legacy, the tax cuts, is at risk because of his irresponsible fiscal policies. Yet he apparently never realized that there was the slightest link between outlays and revenues.

The GOP needs to articulate a new philosophy of government. Washington should be an institution of limited, enumerated powers, as originally envisioned by the Constitution. The national government must drop responsibilities in order to cut programs and reduce spending.

First, Washington should no longer be the first place that people go to respond to problems, however real. No doubt, private individuals and organizations don't always get it right, and localities and states often get it wrong. Nevertheless, all of them remain closer to people, problems, and solutions. Whether the question is crime, education, health care, transportation, or welfare, it is best answered privately, and next at the state and local levels. That's why the founders created a national government of only limited, enumerated powers.

The GOP must be willing to allow other levels of government to act even if doing so runs against the Republican Party platforms and interests. Consistency may be the hobgoblin of small minds to politicians, but it is the only way to actually shrink federal activities and outlays. And only when Washington eschews responsibility for solving every problem in America will people return to state capitals, city halls, and, most importantly, private organizations. The most important policy objective should be to revive America's "little platoons," which offer the best answer to man our nation's toughest problems.

Second, the only welfare that the federal government should consider supplying is for the poor. No more corporate welfare. No more pork-barrel hand-outs to local voters, campaign supporters, and influential interests. And no more middle-class welfare, benefits for Americans who can afford to care for themselves. This means directly confronting Medicare and Social Security, ending benefits for the well-to-do and allowing younger people to opt out of the programs.

Moreover, the national government needs to turn the war on poverty over first to private charities, and next to local and state governments. Uncle Sam should expand tax incentives for private giving, defunding federal programs as the former expands. Republican politicians should emphasize the importance of individual responsibility both to escape poverty and help those who cannot succeed alone.

Today, it seems, almost everyone is on the federal dole. Many people cannot imagine accepting responsibility for their own lives. That must change. Insisting on individual responsibility would generate more than a little political opposition. But the alternative for the GOP is to

forever be the “me-too party,” dedicated to expanding government, just a little more slowly than the Democrats.

Third, Republicans must adjust American foreign policy and military spending to what the founders’ meant by “common defense”: the defense of America. The U.S. was established as a republic among empires, not another empire. America’s foreign policy should be humble, as candidate George W. Bush once advocated. Only such a humble foreign policy will allow a responsible defense budget, since military spending is the price of a nation’s foreign policy.

Circumstances sometimes require a more active foreign policy and bigger military — fighting World War II and confronting the Soviet Union, for instance. But the Cold War is over and the U.S. dominates the globe like no other nation, state, or empire ever before.

Most of what Washington does today has nothing to do with protecting America. The big U.S. commitments are simply a form of international welfare. The Europeans don’t need defending: after all, collectively they have a bigger population and economy than America. South Korea has huge advantages over North Korea. Japan has much at stake in a stable international economic order, yet devotes less than one-fourth as much effort to defense as we do.

It is bad enough when the Republican Party forces U.S. taxpayers to pay for an American welfare state. But why should the GOP make working Americans subsidize even more lavish *European* welfare states?

However attractive nation-building might appear to be from a humanitarian standpoint, there is no constitutional warrant for the U.S. government attempting to remake the rest of the world. And if social engineering won’t work at home — a standard GOP mantra — then how can Republicans expect federal bureaucrats to reach across religious, social, ethnic, historical, ideological, and geographic differences to successfully transform other societies. Even worse, why would the successors to colonists who refused to allow Britain, from which so many came, to impose taxes without their consent expect the rest of the world to welcome American invasions and occupations?

Finally, Republicans must stand by the Constitution even when it might seem to be in their political interest to abandon it. War is the health of the state, warned Randolph Bourne, and no where is that truer than when it comes to the national security state.

No doubt it was tempting for Republicans to gain political advantage by demagoguing the security issue after 9/11, charging Democrats with treason when any of them suggested placing the slightest restraint on presidential power. But both the Constitution and the cause of limited government suffered tragically as a result. The U.S. government may have needed additional powers, but not perpetual and unreviewable powers.

What responsible governance required was balance. A firm commitment to bedrock individual liberties combined with narrow expansion of essential powers backed by strong accountability. In the future, the GOP must act in the recognition that any additional powers granted to government will be available to Democratic officeholders as well. And some powers — most notably torture — should remain beyond the authority of any U.S. government official.

The resurgent Republican Party must meet a heavy burden of proof. After winning control of Congress in 1994, the GOP quickly abandoned its revolutionary rhetoric and joyously expanded government at every turn. If Republicans act the same way this time, they deserve political oblivion.

The only way to avoid that fate is to adopt a principled commitment to limited, constitutional government. The voters have given the GOP another chance. The Republican Party must not blow this opportunity.

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