

Identifying intellectual bearings of state GOP like grabbing greased pig

By Craig Ladwig

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When the Indiana Policy Review Foundation was challenged at the end of this session to identify the intellectual bearings of the Indiana GOP, we were told it would be a slippery task — slippery as a greased pig is slippery.

The party has become largely one of slogans, not ideas, with leaders who can't distinguish between the public good and their own good. A friend, a founder of the conservative movement here, gave us fair warning:

“In pursuit of such good as may seem to them convenient, they recognize no restraint as a matter of constitutional law, sound judgment or good taste. They are clueless as to how the policies they often embrace are indistinguishable in theory from those they frequently oppose. They are at heart meddlers who are compelled to impose their personal dispositions on people whose lives they rarely understand, Their saving grace is that they aren't Democrats.”

But we proceed nonetheless. Tom Charles Huston, an Indianapolis blogger and combat veteran of both the Statehouse and White House, provides a list of tendencies at work here under the cover of “conservatism.”

Neoconservatism, which Huston addresses in one of our cover articles, is the most dynamic but only because it is the loudest, with the most aggressive and articulate spokesmen. Silent is a Whig or countryman tendency, perhaps because there are not enough small farmers and small merchants left in the state to put up a shout. Others tendencies on the list:

Tory (George Will, Jeffrey Hart). Classical liberal (Cato, Reason). Old right (Pat Buchanan, The American Conservative). Traditionalist (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, scattered students of Russell Kirk). Straussian (the Claremont Institute, James Ceaser, Hadley Arkes, Hillsdale, Ashbrook Center). Populist (tea party, religious right). Republicanist (National Review, Fox News, most Hoosier Republicans).

We learn that the Indiana party has always been less conservative ideologically than most assume. In many ways, the GOP in 2014 still is the party of Robert Dunkerson Orr.

The Vanderburgh County organization, decidedly liberal by any standard, was an outlier when Orr took control in 1951. He would ride it to the governor's office on a simple trick, one that chairmen in GOP strongholds rarely risk — he slated candidates, building enthusiasm and influence when he won even as he would have garnered ignominy had he lost.

And yet, as a young editor sitting down with Orr even I could see that he was an unreconstructed mercantilist, a nice way of saying crony capitalist. He believed government was our chief wealth creator. It will tell you something about the man's focus that he issued a press release during his second term commanding reporters to thereafter refer to him as "Robert" rather than "Bob."

Orr left the Party moribund. But it was not always that way. From 1934 to 1964 the debate was spirited. It split between the Halleck and the Jenner factions, which corresponded to the Eisenhower-Taft split at the national level.

The two groups rallied around Goldwater in 1964, although they bitterly fought over the gubernatorial nomination. Later, Nixon was strong here, but pockets of Rockefeller enthusiasm sustained an organized campaign in the 1968 primary.

Again, though, our modern Republican governors have been moderates or moderate-conservatives, with Ralph Gates, George Craig, Otis Bowen, Orr and the much-lauded Mitch Daniels on the moderate side.

The assumption that this is the "reasonable" side, the "right side of history," salts the dinner-party conversation of the current Indianapolis bunch. But mention Harold Handley or Edgar Whitcomb, the only hardcore conservatives produced by Indiana Republicans in six decades, and watch the forks drop and the eyes roll. For it is difficult to find a GOP politician anywhere in Indiana who does not profess to be the model of a true blue "conservative."

Those claims, as Richard Lugar's career is testimony, generally lack sufficient elaboration to detect what is meant other than a "good Republican in the Reagan tradition." Such vapid lip service to intelligible political philosophy, alas, now is the hallmark of Hoosier Republicanists.

Even so, elections still matter, along with events — economic, social and, ultimately, military. The pig is slippery but not infinitely so.

Craig Ladwig is editor of the Indiana Policy Review.