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A New Agenda - Charting a course from our crossroads

By Sen. Mike Lee – November 25, 2013

What do we do next, not only in the fight to stop Obamacare but, more generally, to advance a larger, positive vision of America and craft a practical plan to get us there?

One of conservatives' defining virtues is our insistence on learning from history. And in recent weeks, I have come to believe the most instructive history that conservatives can learn from today is our own: in particular, the history of the conservative movement and the Republican party in the late 1970s. In this history, conservatives today can find hope and encouragement, but also an urgent challenge.

By 1977, the Republican party was in disarray. The party establishment had been discredited by political failure and policy debacles, foreign and domestic. A new generation of grassroots conservatives was rising up to challenge the establishment.

The culmination of that challenge was Ronald Reagan's 1976 primary campaign against a far less conservative, establishment incumbent. That campaign failed, of course, and was derided by Washington insiders as a foolish "civil war" that ultimately served only to elect Democrats. In other words, we have been here before. And, of course, we know now that Reagan and the conservative movement were vindicated in 1980.

So it is tempting for conservatives today to believe that history is on the verge of repeating itself, and that our struggles with the Republican establishment are only a prelude to preordained victory, and our own vindication -- our generation's 1980 -- is just around the corner.

But there is still a piece missing, a glaring difference between the successful conservative challenge to the Washington establishment in the late 1970s and our challenge to the establishment today. Much of the difference can be found in the years between 1976 and 1980 -- when the systematic translation of conservatism's bedrock principles into new and innovative policy reforms occurred.

In *The Conservative Mind*, Russell Kirk observed that "conservatives inherit from [Edmund] Burke a talent for re-expressing their convictions to fit the time."

That is precisely what the conservatives of the late 1970s did. The ideas that defined and propelled the Reagan Revolution did not come down from a mountain etched in stone tablets. They were forged in an open, roiling, diverse debate about how conservatism could truly meet the challenges of that day. That debate invited all conservatives and, as we now know, elevated the best.

There was Jack Kemp, advancing supply-side economics to combat economic stagnancy. There were James Buckley and Henry Hyde, taking up the cause of the unborn after *Roe v. Wade*. There was Milton Friedman, promoting the practical and moral superiority of free enterprise. There were Cold Warriors

like Irving Kristol and Jeane Kirkpatrick, challenging the premise of peaceful coexistence and moral equivalence with the Soviets.

There were Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, arguing in *To Empower People* that the "mediating institutions" of civil society protected and promoted human happiness more effectively than big-government programs. There were Professors Robert Bork and Antonin Scalia, challenging the received wisdom of constitutional interpretation laid down by the Warren Court. There were think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the new Cato Institute, and a flowering of grassroots organizations around the country.

Together, that generation of conservatives transformed a movement that was anti-statist, anti-Communist, and anti-establishment and made it pro-reform.

Contrary to the establishment's complaints, conservatives in the late 1970s did not start a "civil war." They started a (mostly) civil debate. And because of that confident and deeply conservative choice -- to argue rather than quarrel, to persuade rather than simply purge -- the leaders of the establishment never knew what hit them. Put simply, in 1976, the conservative movement found a leader for the ages, yet it still failed. By 1980, the movement had forged an agenda for its time, and only then did it succeed.

What that generation did -- comprehensively re-expressing conservative convictions to fit the time -- the GOP has not done since. Conservative activists and intellectuals are still providing new energy and producing new ideas. But on the whole, elected Republicans and candidates have not held up our end. Instead of emulating those earlier conservatives, too many Republicans today mimic them -- still advocating policies from a bygone age.

It's hard to believe, but by the time we reach November 2016 we will be about as far, chronologically, from Reagan's election as Reagan's election was from D-Day. Yet as the decades pass and a new generation of Americans faces a new generation of problems, the party establishment clings to its 1970s agenda like a security blanket.

And so, to many Americans today, especially to the underprivileged and middle class, or those who have come of age or immigrated since Reagan left office, the Republican party may not seem to have much of a relevant reform message at all. That is the real reason the GOP is in such internal disarray today.

The gaping hole in the middle of the Republican party today -- the one that separates the grassroots from establishment leaders -- is precisely the size and shape of a new, unifying conservative reform agenda.

For years, we have tried to bridge that gulf with tactics and personalities and spin. But it doesn't work. To revive and reunify our movement, we must fill the void with new and innovative policy ideas. Today, as it was a generation ago, the establishment will not produce that agenda. And so, once again, conservatives must.

It's time for another Great Debate, and we should welcome all input. Grassroots and establishment, conservatives and moderates, libertarians and traditionalists, interventionists and non-interventionists,

economic conservatives and social conservatives: All are part of our movement and vital to our success, and should be welcome in this debate.

There are still nearly three years before Republicans will have a chance to select a new, unifying conservative leader. But together we can start debating and developing a new, unifying conservative agenda right now.

Where do we begin? A generation ago, conservatives forged an agenda to meet the great challenges facing Americans in the late 1970s: inflation, poor growth, and Soviet aggression, along with a dispiriting pessimism about the future of the nation and their own families.

The great challenge of our generation is America's growing crisis of stagnation and sclerosis -- a crisis that comes down to a shortage of opportunities.

This opportunity crisis presents itself in three principal ways: economic immobility among the poor, who are too often trapped in poverty; insecurity in the middle class, where families just can't seem to get ahead; and cronyist privilege at the top, where political and economic elites unfairly profit at everyone else's expense. The Republican party should tackle these three crises head on.

First, we need a new, comprehensive anti-poverty and upward-mobility agenda designed not simply to help people in poverty, but to help and empower them to get out.

Here, my home state of Utah can be a guide. A recent study found the Salt Lake City metropolitan area to be the most upwardly mobile region in the United States. In addition to having a well-managed, limited government that allows jobs and opportunity to abound, Utah is home to an enormously successful private welfare system led by churches, businesses, and community groups and volunteers.

A new anti-poverty effort must recognize that for able-bodied adults work is not a necessary evil but an essential pathway to personal happiness and prosperity. And it should also force Republicans and Democrats to acknowledge that there is another marriage debate in this country -- one concerning fatherless children, economic inequality, and broken communities -- that deserves as much public attention as the other.

Second, we need a new, comprehensive anti-cronyism agenda to break up the corrupt nexus of big government, big business, and big special interests. We need a new corporate-tax code and regulatory system to eliminate lobbyists' loopholes and giveaways, level the playing field between businesses, big and small, and foster a dynamic, globally competitive private sector.

We need to end subsidies that unfairly favor some businesses and industries over others. And the Republican party must make a fundamental commitment to end its support for corporate welfare in any form.

The Left today no longer represents the "little guy," but the crony clients of the ever-expanding special-interest state. Progressives have become the party of Wall Street, K Street, and Pennsylvania Avenue. The GOP must become the party of Main Street, everywhere.

The third essential piece of our new agenda should be a new conservatism of the working and middle classes. Today, working families' take-home pay is flat, but the staples of middle-class security and opportunity -- health care, education, home ownership, work/life balance, and children -- are becoming harder to afford all the time.

Progressives recognize these problems but say we just need more government programs to give working families more government money. But as we have seen once again over the last five years, big government creates opportunity for the middlemen at the expense of the middle class. Its programs only mask the broken policies that artificially raise costs and restrict access in the first place. Instead, conservatives need new ideas to address the root causes of those problems.

The first and most important policy goal Republicans must adopt to improve the lives of middle-class families is and will remain the full repeal of Obamacare. Health care is one of the main reasons that the cost of living in the middle class is increasing too quickly for many Americans to keep up. At the same time, it is the main reason government spending and debt are out of control. The law is going to make both of those problems worse -- accelerating health-care costs for both families and the government.

At the same time, Obamacare poses very serious threats to our constitutional system, to the relationship between Washington and the states, to individual liberty and conscience rights, to the strength of our economy, and to the quality of our health-care system.

That puts health care right at the center of what conservatives need to be thinking about. And it means our movement has to be intensely engaged not only in the fight to repeal, but also in the debate to replace, Obamacare.

It took Obamacare to get Republican health-care-policy innovation off the sidelines, but we're finally in the game. And today, conservative ideas are not only superior to Obamacare -- they are superior to the status quo before Obamacare.

The House Republican Study Committee has introduced a comprehensive health-care-reform plan. The Heritage Foundation proposed its own health-care-reform package as part of the Saving the American Dream plan, which I introduced in the Senate last year. It included, among other things, a universal tax credit to buy health insurance, with extra help for those with lower incomes. House Budget Committee chairman Paul Ryan and others are working on their own health-care plans that will continue to improve the debate.

And this is as it should be. Too many in Washington seem to believe that on any issue, Republicans should either have one plan, which everyone supports in lockstep, or have no plan at all. But unity cannot come at the expense of creativity. The day will come when Republicans need a health-care plan. Today we need ten.

Conservatives are supposed to believe in the wisdom of markets. So let's trust the marketplace of ideas. If we want policy innovation, we need to innovate policy.

For my part, I am currently working on four pieces of legislation specifically designed to address four leading challenges facing middle-class families today.

To address the rising cost of raising children, I have introduced a pro-family, pro-growth tax-reform plan that lowers rates, simplifies the code, and begins to correct what I call the "parent tax penalty." Under the current system, parents are required to contribute to Social Security and Medicare twice -- first when they pay their payroll taxes, and then again by bearing the costs of raising their children, who will grow up to support those programs in the future, in addition to starting businesses, curing diseases, and having families themselves. Conservatives rightly emphasize reforms to promote investment, and so we should apply the same logic to the incalculable social and economic investment parents make in their children. Under my plan, a married couple with two children making the national median income of \$51,000 would see a tax cut of \$5,000.

To provide working parents more flexibility to manage work/life balance, I have introduced legislation to give private-sector hourly employees the same comp-time options currently enjoyed only by government employees.

To help cut down on wasteful commuting time and reopen the suburban frontiers, I have developed a bill to devolve federal highway authority to the states, which can raise and spend revenue for infrastructural improvements according to their own needs, priorities, and values.

And to open up access to post-secondary education, I will soon introduce a bill to allow states to create alternative college-accreditation systems -- allowing federal student aid to follow students not only to traditional colleges, but to apprenticeships, training programs, competency testing, and off-campus learning opportunities.

Taken together, some more take-home pay, more time with the kids, a shorter commute, and more access to college won't necessarily revolutionize our society, or cause the oceans to recede, or make everyone rich.

What they -- and other conservative reforms -- could and should do is make our economy a little stronger, our society a little fairer, and life a little better for America's moms and dads and children. And that's a mandate for leadership in any generation.

There is obviously much more to be done. The Republican party, at its best, is a party of ideas. It is ideas that unite and inspire conservatives, and the leaders of Reagan's generation understood that. We must, too.

Especially in the wake of recent controversies, many conservatives are more frustrated with the establishment than ever before. And we have every reason to be. But, however justified, frustration is not a platform. Anger is not an agenda. And outrage, as a habit, is not even conservative. Outrage, resentment, and intolerance are gargoyles of the Left. For us, optimism is not just a message -- it's a principle. American conservatism, at its core, is about gratitude, cooperation, trust, and above all hope.

It is also about inclusion. Successful political movements are about identifying converts, not heretics. This, too, is part of the challenge before us.

In his 1977 speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference, effectively kicking off that era's great conservative debate, Ronald Reagan said:

If we truly believe in our principles, we should sit down and talk. Talk with anyone, anywhere, at any time if it means talking about the principles for the Republican party. Conservatism is not a narrow ideology, nor is it the exclusive property of conservative activists.

Do we have the same spirit of charity and confidence in our ideas today? If we do not, this moment and opportunity will pass us by. We will lose, and we will deserve to lose.

And, rest assured, in that unfortunate event, it will not be the indifferent Republican establishment that profits from our failure. It will be a parade of progressives who will continue unabated to lead our country farther away from our hopes, and our values, and our ability to do anything about it.

If our generation of conservatives wants to enjoy our own defining triumph, our own 1980, we are going to have to deserve it. That means sharpening more pencils than knives. The kind of work it will require is neither glamorous nor fun -- and sometimes it isn't even noticed. But it is necessary.

To deserve victory, conservatives have to do more than pick a fight. We have to win a debate. And to do that, we need more than just guts. We need an agenda.

Mr. Lee is a U.S. senator from Utah. This piece is adapted from remarks delivered at the Heritage Foundation on October 29.