

Tampa Bay Times

Where far right is still wrong

By Daniel Ruth, Times Columnist

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A gutted gazelle rotting away on the Serengeti Plain hasn't been picked over by scavengers as much as the decomposing political career of Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Lame Duck Walking.

There's been no shortage of speculation about how one of the most powerful figures in Washington, who by all accounts had a bigger advantage over his opponent than the Tampa Bay Rays' David Price taking the mound in a Little League game, could have so decisively had his tuckus handed to him last Tuesday night.

When you lose this big to a candidate with all the name recognition of James Polk's vice president, just about any explanation will probably have some merit.

But let's begin with this: The reason the following two political axioms are so shopworn and oft-repeated is because they are true — and Cantor egregiously violated both of them. First, even if you are unopposed always run like you are 10 points down. And second, all politics truly is local — no matter how far up the political food chain he rises, a pol ignores the folks back home at his own peril.

Whatever other missteps or political incompetence Cantor may be guilty of, when you don't pay attention to your constituents, including not even bothering to show up in your Virginia district on Election Day, you pretty much deserve to be given the bum's rush out of office.

Apparently the congressman's loss to Randolph-Macon College professor David Brat also has been attributed to the accusation that he was not conservative enough, earning Cantor the Scarlet RINO.

The idea that Eric Cantor — who was so far to the right on the political spectrum he could be the poster child for the Flat Earth Society — wasn't conservative enough is a bit like suggesting Penelope Cruz is unqualified to do a nude scene because she isn't sexy enough.

Cantor did commit the unpardonable sin of uttering the word "immigration" without the proper tea party approved modifiers: Satan, communist, Obama, Kenya and Agenda 21. That paved the way for him to be cast as not suitably crazy enough to be considered "conservative" in today's political landscape of amber waves of insane.

It is entirely possible the constituents of Virginia's 7th Congressional District could well find themselves represented in Washington by an economics professor whose faculty position reportedly has been underwritten by Koch Brothers-controlled Cato Institute to advance the philosophy of Ayn Rand, the author of one of literature's greatest doorstops, Atlas Shrugged.

The stunning defeat of Cantor means you are more likely to find a GOP congressional candidate extolling the virtues of beads and tobacco leaves as an alternative currency rather than risk being cast as a tea party apostate for merely suggesting immigration reform ought to be debated. By making any rational effort at immigration reform anathema to Republican tea party Torquemadas, congressional candidates, fearing they'll be burned at the Rush Limbaugh stake of stupid, will capitulate to the forces of demagogic lemmings.

This sort of feckless stump strategy may be a recipe for protecting safely drawn Republican congressional seats. But when a political organization blithely dismisses the Hispanic vote by coming off as a bunch of grumpy, angry, middle-aged white guys sitting around the 19th hole complaining about their Mexican gardeners, Republicans have dithered their way into irrelevance as a party incapable of competing nationwide for the presidency.

That's not a political party. It's the hustings equivalent of Lord of the Flies.

The sudden demise of Cantor at the hands of an opponent also means an already do-nothing Congress will lapse even deeper into a legislative coma. And there, sitting astride Republican hopes for even greater insignificance, looms David Brat, who when interviewed shortly after his win over Cantor could not answer questions as to what he thought about arming Syrian rebels or raising the minimum wage.

Clearly Brat didn't want to be drawn into the trap of the minimum wage debate. After all, he's only an economics professor. You don't want to get too bogged down on silly stuff like issues that Congress runs away from anyway.

What is important to know is that David Brat stands foursquare in favor of God and Ronald Reagan. These days, that sort of profile in pandering qualifies as boldly visionary.