

# *GOP and the politics of historical amnesia*

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Ronald Reagan made the news this week when President Barack Obama mischievously mused that not even the Gipper could win a Republican presidential primary today.

If that is true, it follows that perhaps no past GOP nominee of the modern primary era, from Richard Nixon on down to John McCain, could win now. To one degree or another, all were heretics by the standards of 2012's Republican primary voters.

The transformation of the GOP from a centre-right party, in which moderate and conservative factions cohabitated, into an ideologically homogeneous movement that tolerates no deviation from the doctrine of tax cuts and Christian values is now complete.

How it happened is largely the story of a party establishment that forfeited any role in policy innovation. The amorphous collection of largely moderate elected and unelected officials dedicated to raising money and fighting elections outsourced the ideas portion of their job.

Since their creation by wealthy conservative businessmen in the 1970s, the free enterprise Heritage Foundation and the libertarian Cato Institute – joined in 1986 by the anti-tax Americans for Tax Reform – have become the leading sources of Republican policy.

“Conservatives proved better institution-builders,” notes author Geoffrey Kabaservice in *Rule and Ruin*, a new book that charts the “downfall of moderation” in the GOP. They created “an infrastructure of think tanks, publishing houses, media outlets, PACs and pressure groups in imitation of an establishment unable to exert itself for moderates in the same way.” The moderates should have seen it coming as early as 1964, when Barry Goldwater won the nomination because the GOP establishment failed to unite behind a single candidate.

After the libertarian Mr. Goldwater's disastrous showing in the 1964 election, the establishment made sure not to repeat its error and got behind Mr. Nixon

in 1968. And in subsequent races, the establishment used the so-called "invisible primary" to line up behind a moderate pick well before the Iowa caucuses kicked off the actual voting.

The exception came in 1980, when George H. W. Bush was the establishment favourite, while Mr. Reagan was the conservative outlier.

Contrary to Mr. Obama's suggestion, the Ronald Reagan of 1980 would surely pass muster with today's more demanding GOP primary voters. After all, he embraced supply-side economics, a far-right idea derided by Mr. Bush as "voodoo economics."

Mr. Reagan was also a master politician facing a field of insipid rivals, including Mr. Bush and Illinois congressman John Anderson (Mr. Anderson later ran for the presidency as an independent). Mr. Reagan rolled to victory in the primaries and subsequent general election against incumbent president Jimmy Carter.

It is what Mr. Reagan did in office that makes Mr. Obama's assertion most salient. After passing a massive tax cut in 1981, a ballooning deficit led Mr. Reagan to repeal much of that reduction the subsequent year. What's more, his 1983 reform of Social Security included higher payroll taxes for businesses and workers.

"Candidate Reagan does look much different than President Reagan," concedes John Jones, a communications professor at Pepperdine University in California, who teaches a seminar on Mr. Reagan's political rhetoric. "Reagan was willing to take half a loaf and come back later for the rest. Now, [in the GOP] it's all or nothing."

To win his party's presidential nomination this year, the heretofore moderate Mitt Romney has described himself as "severely conservative" and bowed at the altar of tax cuts ad infinitum.

The former Massachusetts governor's transformation reflects not only new primary rules that have empowered the party's base, but the waning influence of what is left of the old establishment. The new establishment is led by people like Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform.

Rick Santorum may have been right when he declared earlier this year: "As conservatives and Tea Party folks, we are not just wings of the Republican Party. We are the Republican Party."

What is certain is that Mr. Romney's late father would not recognize the party his son is about to lead. When George Romney ran for the 1968 nomination, the GOP field was awash in moderates. Today, there are none, if his son's conservative conversion is authentic.

As Michigan governor, George Romney introduced the state's first income tax – a distinction that would surely get him run out of the party now – and implemented a host of social programs to address the racial strife that had led to riots in Detroit.

Mitt Romney was no slouch as Massachusetts governor either. His reform of the state's health-care system, the inspiration for the Obama administration law Mr. Romney now promises to repeal if he wins in November, surely made him his father's son.

Repudiating that accomplishment and those of his father is the price Mr. Romney has paid to get the nomination.

“Much of the current conservative movement is characterized by this sort of historical amnesia and symbolic parricide,” Mr. Kabaservice insists. It seeks “to undo key aspects of the Republican legacy, such as Reagan's elimination of corporate tax loopholes [and] Nixon's environmental and labour safety programs.”

Lacking Mr. Reagan's political acumen, a president Romney might not be able to wiggle out of the hard-right positions he now embraces if the exigencies of governing required it.

His father might call that a Pyrrhic victory.