

Symposium

Expert Opinion

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Minority Report

The GOP in exile, 100 days later.

An NRO Symposium

Barack Obama has been president for 100 days, and where is the GOP? We asked some leaders on the right: Has the conservative movement begun to fight? Facing the specter of increasing Democratic majorities in Congress, can it rebuild? What should the Right be doing right now? Is it doing it?

EDWARD H. CRANE

Pres. Barack Obama is not a socialist. He is a thoroughgoing statist, perhaps the worst in American history. And with Wilson, FDR, and LBJ, he's got some serious competition. Republicans in Congress lack the leadership to challenge the president's audacious power grabs. More important, they lack any serious philosophical basis for doing so. The acronym RINO is an oxymoron, for the name "Republican" in fact designates someone with a commitment to nothing more than maintaining political power. The purpose of maintaining that power is to, well, maintain that power.

There is a reason sales of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* are going through the roof. The book is nothing if not prescient. The "Troubled Assets Relief Program" is straight from its pages. Monday's *New York Times* front page suggests Atlas may be starting to shrug. "Doctor Shortage Proves Obstacle to Obama Goals," laments the headline. Hmm. Wonder why there would be a doctor shortage in the face of nationalized health care? Perhaps bright young people considering a career don't want to work for the federal bureaucracy?

Time for those conservatives serious about limited government to re-read Goldwater's *Conscience of a Conservative*. Strategically, conservatives have made three major mistakes. The first was to follow the advice of supply-side guru (and big-government Democrat) Jude Wanniski and not talk about spending cuts, much less the proper role of government. Economic growth replaced individual liberty as the rallying cry of far too many GOPers. Second, the neocons — mostly statist themselves — should never have been accepted into the fold. All they gave us is a war against a country that never attacked us and schemes for "national greatness" like going to Mars. Enough. Finally, conservatives should jettison the social agenda of gay marriage, flag burning, and school prayer, and focus instead on federalism. Politics is about man's relationship to the state. That relationship, to be healthy, should be minimal.

— *Edward H. Crane is the president of the Cato Institute.*

ED FUELNER

In 1942, following the Allied victory at El Alamein, Winston Churchill declared, "This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

That's how conservatives ought to view Barack Obama's first 100 days: The end of the beginning of our struggle to reassert conservative policy ideas and our country's traditional commitment to free trade, free markets, and free people.

The first action took place exactly two weeks before the 100th day.

On April 15, Tax Day, hundreds of thousands of regular Americans took to the streets for more than 3,000 protests that were 21st century "Tea Parties." They were united by the conviction that government has become too big, too interventionist, too wasteful, and too indifferent to the people who pay for it all. Fundamentally conservative, this was a new grassroots movement.

Of course, every movement needs leaders, and the modern conservative movement has a number of them.

Reps. Mike Pence, Paul Ryan, and Tom Price led the opposition to Obama's so-called stimulus bill in February. Sens. John Cornyn, Tom Coburn, and Jim DeMint are fighting for more sensible tax and spending plans. And in the states, Govs. Bobby Jindal and Mark Sanford have spurned some federal stimulus money that would have left their taxpayers all the poorer in the future.

Conservatives know things won't be easy. But we should also remind ourselves that President Obama is more popular than his policies are.

Over the next 100 days, and the hundreds that will follow, we'll keep pressing for sane fiscal policy. We'll push for policies that promote abundant, affordable energy, not trillion-dollar tax hikes in the guise of cap-and-trade legislation. We'll resist the move toward national health care, promoting instead real health reform that gives people the ability to choose and keep their own affordable coverage. We'll work for entitlement reform and insist that the administration bring federal spending under control.

When history is written, we're confident it will show that conservative ideas prevailed.

— *Ed Feulner is president of the Heritage Foundation.*

BURTON FOLSOM JR.

After 100 days of the Obama presidency, the GOP often seems overly cautious — in search of a coherent strategy. Is there a historical analogy that might help the Republicans? I think so, and here it is.

In 1920, after Woodrow Wilson and the Democrats had controlled the presidency for two terms, the fractured Republicans devised a battle plan to recapture the White House. What did they do? They forcefully attacked the wild spending and high unemployment foisted on the nation by the Democrats. Then, when Harding and Coolidge were in office, they (1) cut income-tax rates sharply, and (2) cut federal spending to the point that the U.S. had budget surpluses each year of the 1920s.

What resulted from this campaign of fiscal conservatism? First, unemployment plummeted from 12 percent in 1921 to a 3.3 percent average from 1923 to 1929. The tax cuts not only spurred investment, but federal revenue also increased during the 1920s. That was the first trial of supply-side economics, and Coolidge was reelected so decisively in 1924 that critics wondered if the Democrats could survive

as a major political party.

The key maneuver in the Republican recovery was offering voters a choice and making sure that choice was fiscal restraint. The GOP told entrepreneurs they could keep the bulk of what they earned. The world, after watching budget surpluses accrue, saw that the U.S. had the financial discipline to be trusted with foreign capital.

Today, the Republicans need similar principled commitment to fiscal restraint — opposing bailouts (whether to GM, AIG, or the UAW) and taking a stand both for health-savings accounts and against government health care. Always educate the population: The last \$787 billion stimulus package will cost U.S. taxpayers \$25,000 per second every second of the year 2009.

— *Burton Folsom Jr., a history professor at Hillsdale College, writes for BurtFolsom.com and is the author of [New Deal or Raw Deal?](#)*

NEWT GINGRICH

Conservatives face a hard but clear set of challenges.

First, we must articulate a message that honors America's historic achievements while defining a vision of a desirable future consistent with our values and principles.

Second, we must communicate why the Left's policies are both a departure from our proud history and a threat to that desirable future.

Third, we must outline the right policies and right solutions in such a way that every American understands what needs to be done today to realize that future.

And fourth, we must hold fast to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's rule that "first you win the argument and then you win the vote."

We are in opposition to a president whose dominance of Congress resembles Lyndon Johnson's. His weakness in foreign policy resembles Jimmy Carter. His desire to swiftly and fundamentally change America makes him the most radical president in American history.

Faced with that reality, it should be possible for the conservative movement to grow a new majority coalition that favors America as we have known it: unlimited economic opportunity, strong national defense that puts protecting Americans above protecting terrorists, a desire to protect our children and grandchildren instead of spending them into massive debt, and a belief that our rights come from God, not from the state.

In *Ronald Reagan: Rendezvous with Destiny*, the new movie that my wife Callista and I made with Dave Bossie and Citizens United, you can see how the conservative movement came together to change history in a similar fashion during the Carter administration.

We can do it again.

— *Newt Gingrich is former speaker of the House of Representatives.*

ERNEST ISTOOK

Conservatives are fighting but not persuading.

We must reeducate a nation whose core principles have been eroded by left-leaning media, Hollywood, political correctness, and conservative misbehavior.

Liberal ascendance reflects American attitudes more than we like to admit, in a country where only 53 percent say capitalism beats socialism.

Simply promoting lower taxes and smaller government won't resonate with millions who enjoy zero income-tax liability or who receive government benefits. We must explain that they still have a personal pocketbook stake.

How? With a kitchen-table agenda. In a single word: Consumerism — the belief that the free choice of consumers should dictate society's economic structure.

Washington mandates have pushed up prices on everything that's important. Some examples:

- The 2007 energy bill will raise car prices by \$5,000 to \$7,000 per vehicle.
- Health-care costs reflect 135,000 pages of regulations.
- Ethanol mandates have fueled soaring food prices.
- New light bulbs cost 5 times more than the old.
- How about the economy-wrecking mortgage meltdown? A HUD regulation created a quota (28 percent last year) for how many Fannie and Freddie mortgages must go to those with the poorest incomes.

It adds up. A 2004 government report documented that federal regulations cost the typical family of four about \$15,000 each year.

And the red tape and mandates just keep on coming. Cap-and-trade will be the granddaddy of them all. As candidate Barack Obama said, "Under my [energy] plan . . . electricity rates would necessarily skyrocket."

Congressionally engineered hikes in the cost of everything should be discussed as families sit around the kitchen table. The full cost goes beyond regulations and taxes; it's also an issue of freedom.

Big government remains the cause of big problems, not the solution. We know the message can work when delivered well. Ronald Reagan proved it.

— *Ernest Istook calls himself a "recovering congressman" after serving 14 years in the U.S. House of Representatives, and is a distinguished fellow at the [Heritage Foundation](#).*

YUVAL LEVIN

The 100-day point, arbitrary though it is, offers a useful marker of beginning. It is silly to expect accomplishments in so short a time, but reasonable to seek early indications and the pattern of things to come.

For President Obama, the early indications suggest a disconcerting mix of naïveté and inattention in foreign policy (where the inattention, which yields continuity with the policies of the last

administration, is the principal cause for hope), and an even more alarming mix of determined liberal activism and a calibrated rhetoric of pragmatism in domestic policy. The only proposal that can be truly said to be Obama's own — his budget — strongly suggests the rhetoric is a cover for an exceptionally ambitious liberal agenda intended to transform the relationship between Americans and their government in the general direction of European-style social democracy.

For Republicans, relegated to a weak minority status in Washington, the first 100 days suggest some strengths and some weaknesses in the face of Obama's ambitions. They have shown an exceptional (if only occasional) capacity for unity around a few key principles, as in the stimulus vote. They have made what they could of the early hints of populist response to the extraordinary profligacy of Obama's opening days, seen in the tea parties, for instance. They have gestured toward alternatives to the Democrats' approach, as well as criticisms of it, as in the House Republicans' budget.

But even these frankly meager strengths are so far constrained by an overriding weakness: the lack of a coherent constructive conservative vision addressed to the problems of the moment — especially the financial crisis and its consequences. The Left has sought unabashedly to use the crisis to advance its long-term ends. The Right should not be afraid to do the same, and in the process to offer a sense of what conservatives take to be the proper relationship of the people and their government, both in general and in relation to particular problems like health care and entitlements.

America is in the midst of an economic calamity, and conservatives are in the midst of a political one too, but, as a wise conservative once said, "Calamity is unhappily the usual season of reflection." The first 100 days of the age of Obama suggest conservatives have stores of strength to draw upon, but could use some reflection on just how to do so.

— *Yuval Levin is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, senior editor of The New Atlantis, and author of Imagining the Future: Science and American Democracy.*

JIM TALENT

Conservatives need to have confidence in the common sense of the American people. This is the fourth time in the last few decades that conservatives have suffered a comprehensive electoral defeat. It happened in 1964, 1976, and 1992. Each time it happened, the Democrats tried to govern from the left — in fact, each time they moved successively farther to the left — and each time they were then rejected by the American people.

I fully expect the pattern to reassert itself. The real question is not whether the Left will lose power again, but when precisely it will happen, whether the conservative coalition will be prepared to govern when it does, and how much damage will occur in the meantime.

On this last point, conservatives could limit the fallout by keeping national security visible as an issue and in particular by pointing out that the administration's defense policy shows the hypocrisy of its economic policy.

As I wrote two years ago in *National Review* (see my cover story [here](#)), America desperately needs to spend at least 4 percent of its GDP on the national defense to make up for the shortfalls in defense spending over the last 15 years and allow the military to modernize its equipment and sustain the technological superiority that keeps America safe. The need is huge, demonstrable, and growing, especially in view of the fact that every category of global danger is manifestly increasing. Yet the

Obama administration — which has increased the national debt by \$3.5 trillion over the last four months, supposedly to stimulate the economy — is claiming that budget pressure requires it to cut defense programs. Evidently the administration believes that doubling the Department of Energy produces jobs, but buying ships and planes produced by American workers in American industry does not. That's a level of hypocrisy unusual even for Washington, and conservatives could do their country, and the men and women who protect us, a great service by making sure everyone knows about it.

— *Jim Talent is a distinguished fellow at the Heritage Foundation. He has served in the U.S. House of Representatives (1993–2001) and the U.S. Senate (2002–07). He was a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee and, for four years, chairman of the committee's Seapower Subcommittee.*

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