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## The Outsourced Party

By KEVIN BAKER.  
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Who speaks for the Republican Party? The answer is that everyone does -- and therefore, no one does.

What accounts for the division, rancor and lethargy that have beset the party's nominating campaign? It's no great mystery. Republicans have fallen prey to one of the favorite tactics of the heedless, improvident, 21st-century-style capitalism they revere. Their party has been outsourced.

For decades, Republicans have recruited outside groups and individuals to amplify their party's message and its influence. They have carried this off brilliantly, helping to shift the political spectrum in the United States significantly to the right.

When Republicans came to believe in the 1960s that they were up against a "liberal biased" media that would never give them a fair shake, they began the long march to build their own information establishment and to make it predominant.

In 1987, Mark Fowler, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, persuaded his fellow commissioners to abolish the Fairness Doctrine. Since 1949, the commission had required television and radio stations to "devote a reasonable amount of time" to public issues and to present different viewpoints on said issues. But Mr. Fowler insisted that television was not a finite and supremely influential broadcast medium but "just another appliance -- it's a toaster with pictures." He was backed by a pair of Reagan appointees on the federal bench, Robert H. Bork and Antonin Scalia, and the president himself, who vetoed a Democratic effort to codify the doctrine into law.

Right-wing radio was already prevalent on the airwaves before the Fairness Doctrine was abolished. But now it had the field virtually to itself. Conservatives gained a direct outreach to the public, free of any intercession by the "elites" Newt Gingrich is still denouncing. Right-leaning media networks like Clear Channel Communications became major media conglomerates -- with no obligation to broadcast any conflicting views.

The biggest media coup of all for the Republican Party, though, was the advent of nakedly partisan [Fox News](#), created by Roger Ailes, a leading Republican media adviser. Mr. Ailes thereby managed to throw the weight of Rupert Murdoch's worldwide media empire behind the party. Conservative politicians and advocates saw both their ideas amplified and their wallets fattened by a dizzying array of Murdoch television shows, books and newspapers.

But it wasn't just in the daily media where the Republican Party proved ingenious in outsourcing its rhetoric and shifting the national dialogue. In 1971, Lewis F. Powell Jr., a Republican corporate lawyer soon to be appointed to the Supreme Court by Richard M. Nixon, summoned the business community to the cause with his famous memorandum, "Attack on American Free Enterprise System." Mr. Powell wanted business to fight back against what he saw as the many enemies of free enterprise, and his call to arms inspired the founding of the Heritage Foundation, the **Cato Institute**, the Manhattan Institute and other think tanks. Wealthy, right-wing individuals from Richard Mellon Scaife to the Koch brothers poured millions of dollars into the battle of ideas.

The Powell memorandum also sent a vast influx of lobbyists to Washington, increasing their numbers from, at most, a few hundred in 1971 to tens of thousands today -- a great majority interested in "freeing" business from regulation and taxes.

Conservative policy institutes armed the party's candidates with intellectual arguments, while the conservative media barrage blasted a way through to high office for even the most lackluster Republican nominees. Yet this meant that the Republican Party was outsourcing body and soul. Both what the party believed in and the heavy lifting of campaigns was handed over to outside interests that did not necessarily share the party's wider goals.

This has become suddenly and painfully evident this year. Party leaders may not have liked Rush Limbaugh's calling a Georgetown law student a "slut" and a "prostitute" for daring to disagree with him on birth control -- but what does he care? A Republican loss will most likely mean more angry conservatives tuning in and driving up ratings. The most that the garrulous Republican front-runner, Mitt Romney, would allow himself to say about the controversy was that "it's not the language I would have used," while Rick Santorum averred that Mr. Limbaugh was "being absurd" but implied that it was O.K. -- "he's in a very different business than I am."

But he's not. Mr. Limbaugh is in the very same business that Mr. Santorum and Mr. Romney are in -- and guess who's in charge? It's not just that the radio calamity howlers have cowed the party leaders -- it's that they've remade them in their own image. The leading Republican candidates for president have adopted the bombastic, apocalyptic rhetoric of talk radio, insisting that we will "lose America" if they aren't elected and filling their speeches and debates with personal insults. The results are in the poll numbers, as the campaign has steadily driven down the party's appeal, driving up the candidates' negative ratings.

Poll numbers for Republicans in Congress have taken a nose dive, too, thanks to the party's intransigence on Capitol Hill. But what does that matter to the thousands of lobbyists who provide more and more of the money for Congressional campaigns? Sure, a Republican victory might afford them more closed-door sessions on rewriting federal regulations. But Democratic victories will serve their purpose, too, affirming their never-ending fight against "job-killing regulations."

Meanwhile, [Fox News](#) has become a special impediment to Republican order. All the enticements of the Murdoch empire have produced a generation of reality show pols, at least as interested in landing their own TV series as winning office.

Two of the most popular Republican candidates for president going into the race, Mike Huckabee and Sarah Palin, declined to run rather than jeopardize their shows. Newt Gingrich turned much of his campaign into book tours for himself and his wife. Ask yourself which was most likely: that Herman Cain and Michele Bachmann thought they could be elected president or that they were looking to improve their "brand."

AND after decades of trying to undo federal campaign-finance laws, Republicans at last succeeded -- only to watch the rise of the super PAC in their place. Rick Santorum's candidacy has been kept alive largely by Foster Friess, the conservative Christian multimillionaire with the Batman villain name. Mr. Gingrich has his own sponsors, the casino billionaires Sheldon and Miriam Adelson, hawkish supporters of Israel. Does what these individuals care about most fit in with the Republican Party's election strategy? So what?

Yet participating in a democracy means more than simply insisting, over and over again, in as loud and arrogant a voice as possible, in as many venues as your money will allow, on what it is that you want. It means listening, it means convincing, it means compromising -- all those skills that political parties and their leaders used to be fairly good at, and that political campaigns taught them to be good at. But that doesn't much matter to candidates who owe their first loyalty to one or two wealthy sponsors.

Thanks to their inventiveness, Republicans have stumbled into the brave new world of

American politics. They have achieved the political equivalent of shuttering that foul old steel mill and shipping the hard work off for others to do while they dabble in these fascinating new derivatives. But now their candidates and their ideas are seen as so many junk bonds, and they don't seem to have the wherewithal to make the party over from within.

Republicans seem to be finally coalescing around Mitt Romney's candidacy, and he could well win the presidency if the economy slumps again. But the longer-term problem will remain: how to maintain a coherent, mass political party when so many individuals are empowered as never before to redirect it to their own, personal ends.