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National Review: What The GOP Should Do Next

by MICHAEL TANNER



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House Republican leader John Boehner, presumed to be the new Speaker of the House, addresses the crowd during the National Republican Congressional Committee Election Night Results Watch.

November 3, 2010

text size **A A A**

Michael Tanner is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and author of Leviathan on the Right: How Big-Government Conservatism Brought Down the Republican Revolution.

Having won a nearly unprecedented electoral victory, Republicans now find themselves in the position of the proverbial dog that caught the car, wondering what they should do next. Here are ten modest suggestions.

1. It's the Economy, Stupid. The top three issues in this election were: the economy, the economy, and the economy. Voters were willing to swallow their doubts about Republicans and give them another chance because Democratic

economic policies had failed so miserably. This is particularly true among economically conservative, socially moderate suburban voters who backed Democrats in 2006 and 2008 but switched to Republicans this year. Now Republicans will be expected to deliver by cutting spending, taxes, and regulation to create more jobs. That needs to be Republicans' first, second, and third priority. Indeed, it could be argued that one factor in the Democrats' defeat was that they spent so much time in the last two years discussing issues besides the economy. If Republicans spend their first weeks in power debating "Don't Ask Don't Tell" or abortion restrictions, voters are likely to treat them the same way they did Democrats this year.

2. Obamacare Must Be Stopped. Nothing soured voters on Obama's big-government agenda as much as the health-care bill. Democrats who supported Obamacare went down to defeat in disproportionate numbers. Republicans, who campaigned on repealing and replacing the unpopular law, must follow through on that promise. Of course, given the Democrats' ability to filibuster and the president's veto, repeal is highly unlikely. Still, Republicans must do more than hold a symbolic vote in favor of repeal and then forget about it. There are numerous incremental steps they can take, from defunding portions of the law to attacking unpopular provisions.

3. Cut Spending, Not Just Taxes. Republicans have promised to cut taxes, including extending all of the Bush tax cuts. That makes both political and economic sense, especially during an economic downturn. They should also follow through on other tax cuts, including those for businesses. While some types of tax cuts do increase economic growth, it is a mistake to pretend that all tax cuts simply pay for themselves. Nor is there any evidence that you can "starve the beast." Unless we want to keep

marching toward the day when government consumes 45 percent of GDP while the debt continues to grow, Republicans are going to have to make the tough choices to cut — really *cut* — spending.

4. Ban Earmarks. True, they don't amount to a lot of money, just 1.2 percent of federal discretionary spending. But earmarks are an important structural and symbolic component of government spending. Republicans imposed a moratorium on earmarks in 2010, but it expires next year. If that were to happen, voters could rightly conclude that Republicans were not serious about controlling spending. At the very least, Republicans should renew the moratorium. Even better would be a permanent ban on earmarks.

5. Level with the American People. One of the driving sources of the anger felt by so many voters this year was the feeling that government at every level lied to them. Republicans should take a lesson from their British counterparts and be honest with the American people. Balancing the budget and reducing the debt are going to require hard, painful choices. People are going to have to give up some of their favorite programs. But the American people are adults — they can handle the truth.

6. Offer an Alternative. Republicans won this time simply by not being Democrats. But having even a share of governing power means that just opposing the worst of the Obama agenda won't be enough next time. Republicans need to develop and put forward a positive agenda. They need to do this even if they know that the bills will die in the Senate or be vetoed by the president.

7. Investigate...Carefully. Certainly a little bit of oversight is long overdue in Washington. Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA) will be in charge of the Government Oversight Committee with its investigatory and subpoena power. But Republicans need to remember that overzealousness during the Clinton years hurt them. Too often, investigations appeared partisan and mean-spirited. They need to hold the Obama administration accountable, but in a careful and restrained way. Any discussion of impeachment or Obama's birth certificate is an automatic disqualifier.

8. Tackle Entitlements. It is impossible to seriously reduce government spending without tackling entitlements, notably Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. Pre-election, Republicans were less than a tower of courage in this regard, but the report of the president's bipartisan debt commission, expected in December, provides an opening.

9. Don't Fear a Shutdown. Republicans in the House have the power of the purse, meaning that they can control taxes and spending if they stick to their guns. To counter that, the president can threaten a Clinton-style government shutdown. But Obama is no Bill Clinton. Republicans should not be prematurely deterred by a shutdown threat.

10. Remember, the Tea Party Is Still Out There. It became almost a mantra for Republicans to say that they understood that they "lost their way" during the Bush years. This time they were different, they insisted. They wouldn't get caught up in the "business as usual" ways of Washington. If they do — if they fail to deliver on a smaller, less costly, less intrusive government — then the same forces that swept them into power will sweep them right back out.

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David Stewart (David_Stewart) wrote:

While there are actually some good suggestions in here, points one and two begin the piece poorly.

On the economy, how have Obama's policies failed? So far they have taken us from record private sector jobs losses to job gains. Our financial system didn't collapse and growth has returned to most sectors of the economy. I find it hard to paint this reality as a failure. Certainly no magic wand to instantly fix the economy was found, but given that no such wand exists that should be no surprise.

Additionally what policies are the Republican's proposing on this front? I have seen nothing but the same vague talking point policies that were tried under Bush and which got us in this position to start with. If there are different policies out there being proposed I'd love to hear about them sometime.

As far as health care, you can agree or disagree with the plan that was passed, but something has to be done about the exploding cost of healthcare. It has threatened to take down our economy and simply repealing the newly past healthcare reforms will only make that threat worse. Unless there is some alternative plan, dismantling the plan which was past may be politically palatable, but it hurts the country.

Wednesday, November 03, 2010 9:30:01 AM

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Charles Schopen (Shakedown) wrote:

I hate to break it to you, but all the work done on public healthcare and attempting to bring down healthcare costs correlates directly with the economy.

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Kirk Tirakian (beowolf741) wrote:

European Socialism like that in the UK has to cut back not because Socialism failed but because Capitalism gambled all the money away.

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