

The Washington Post

Republican message dated, in any language

By: Michael Gerson – February 22, 2013

IN the summer of 1999, George W. Bush chose the first major policy speech of his presidential campaign to pick a fight with Americans for Tax Reform founder Grover Norquist.

Bush flatly rejected the "destructive" view "that if government would only get out of our way, all our problems would be solved" - a vision the Texas governor dismissed as having "no higher goal, no nobler purpose, than leave us alone".

Norquist had proposed to define conservatism as the "leave us alone" coalition - a movement united by a desire to get government off our backs. Bush countered that "the American government is not the enemy of the American people".

Ed Crane, then president of the libertarian Cato Institute, said the speech sounded like it was written by someone "moonlighting for Hillary Rodham Clinton". I can formally deny that charge.

But the Bush campaign was purposely trying to alter the image of the Republican Party. And the party - rendered more open to change by eight years in the presidential wilderness - gave Bush the leeway to make necessary ideological adjustments.

It is the nature of resilient institutions to take stock of new realities and adjust accordingly. In a new cover essay for Commentary magazine, Peter Wehner and I detail the examples of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair.

Clinton broke a long Democratic presidential losing streak by emphasising middle-class values, advocating the end of "welfare as we know it" and standing up to extreme elements within his coalition.

In Britain, Blair went after the "moral chaos" that led to youth crime, abandoned his party's commitment to public ownership of the means of production, and launched New Labor.

The Republican Party is now in need of similar transformation. Of the past six presidential elections, four have gone to the Democratic nominee, at an average yield of 327 electoral votes to 211 for the Republican. During the two decades from 1968 to 1988, Republicans won five out of six elections, averaging 417 electoral votes to the Democrats' 113 votes. This stunning reversal of electoral fortunes has taken place for a variety of reasons: changing demographics; the end of a GOP foreign policy advantage during the Cold War; a serious gap in candidate quality; the declining relevance of economic policies that seem better suited to the 1980s; and an occasionally deserved reputation for being judgmental and censorious.

A full Republican appreciation of these disturbing fundamentals was delayed by the 2010 mid-term elections, in which an unreconstructed anti-government message seemed to be riding a wave. Just two years later came that wave's withdrawing roar.

The Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, lost by five million votes to a beatable incumbent presiding over an anaemic economy. The explanation is not purely technical or personality oriented. At the national level, Republicans have a winning message for a nation that no longer exists.

In retrospect, the 2012 Republican primary process was entirely disconnected from the actual needs of the party. One candidate pledged to build a 6m- high electrical fence at the border crowned with the sign, in English and Spanish: "It will kill you - Warning." Another promised, as president, to speak out against the damage done to American society by contraception. Another warned that vaccinations may cause "mental retardation."

In the course of 20 debates and in tens of millions of dollars of ads, issues such as upward mobility, education, poverty, safer communities and the environment were rarely mentioned.

A Republican recovery in presidential politics will depend on two factors. First, candidates will need to do more than rebrand existing policy approaches or translate them into Spanish.

Some serious rethinking is necessary, particularly on economic matters. Whatever form Republican proposals eventually take, they must move beyond Reagan-era nostalgia.

Second, Republican primary voters, party activists and party leaders have a choice to make, ruthlessly clarified by recent events. They can take the path of Democrats in 1988, doubling down on a faltering ideology.

Or they can follow the model of Democrats in 1992 and their own party in 2000, giving their nominee the leeway he or she needs to oppose outworn or extreme ideas and to produce an agenda relevant to our time.

