

What's wrong with America's right

Too much anger and too few ideas. America needs a better alternative to Barack Obama.



HAPPY days are here again for the Republicans, or so you might think. Barack Obama's popularity rating is sagging well below 50%. Passing health-care reform has done nothing to help him; most Americans believe he has wasted their money—and their view of how he is dealing with the economy is no less jaded. Although growth has returned, the latest jobs figures are dismal and house repossessions continue to rise. And now his perceived failure to get a grip on the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is hurting him; some critics call it his Hurricane Katrina; others recall Jimmy Carter's long, enervating hostage crisis in Iran. Sixty per cent of Americans think the country is on the wrong track.

All 435 seats in the House are up for grabs in November. The polls portend heavy losses for the Democrats, who currently enjoy a 39-seat majority there. Quite possibly, they will lose control of it. The Republicans stand less chance of winning the Senate, where a third of the seats are contested this year, but they should win enough to make it almost impossible for the Democrats to break a filibuster there by picking off a Republican or two. The second two years of Mr Obama's presidency look like being a lot tougher than the first.

Malice in Wonderland

Mr Obama deserves to be pegged back. This newspaper supported him in 2008 and backed his disappointing-but-necessary health-care plan. But he has done little to fix the deficit, shown a zeal for big government and all too often given the impression that capitalism is something unpleasant he found on the sole of his sneaker. America desperately needs a strong opposition. So it is sad to report that the American right is in a mess: fratricidal, increasingly extreme on many issues and woefully short of ideas, let alone solutions.

This matters far beyond America's shores. For most of the past half-century, conservative America has been a wellspring of new ideas—especially about slimming government. At a time when redesigning the state is a priority around the world, the right's dysfunctionality is especially unfortunate.

The Republicans at the moment are less a party than an ongoing civil war (with, from a centrist point of view, the wrong side usually winning). There is a dwindling band of moderate Republicans who understand that they have to work with the Democrats in the interests of America. There is the old intolerant, gun-toting, immigrant-bashing, mainly southern right which sees any form of co-operation as treachery, even blasphemy. And muddying the whole picture is the tea-party movement, a tax revolt whose activists (some clever, some dotty, all angry) seem to loathe Bush-era free-spending Republicans as much as they hate Democrats. Egged on by a hysterical blogosphere and the ravings of Fox News blowhards, the Republican Party has turned upon itself.

Optimists say this is no more than the vigorous debate that defines the American primary system. They rightly point out that American conservatism has always been a broad church and the battle is not all one way. This week California's Republicans chose two relatively moderate former chief executives, Meg Whitman and Carly Fiorina, to run for governor and the Senate. But both had to dive to the right to win, which will not help them in November. And in neighbouring Nevada the Republicans chose a tea-partier so extreme that she may yet allow Harry Reid, the unloved Democratic Senate leader, to hang on to his seat. Many of the battles are indeed nastier than normal: witness the squabble in Florida, where the popular governor, Charlie Crist, has left the party; Senator Lindsey Graham walking away from climate-change legislation for fear of vile personal attacks; and even John McCain, who has battled with the southern-fried crazies in his party for decades, joining the chorus against Mexican "illegals" to keep his seat.

As for ideas, the Republicans seem to be reducing themselves into exactly what the Democrats say they are: the nasty party of No. They may well lambast Mr Obama for expanding the federal deficit; but it is less impressive when they are unable to suggest alternatives. Paul Ryan, a bright young congressman from Wisconsin, has a plan to restore the budget to balance; it has sunk without a trace. During the row over health care, the right demanded smaller deficits but refused to countenance any cuts in medical spending on the elderly. Cutting back military spending is denounced as surrender to the enemy. Tax rises of any kind (even allowing the unaffordable Bush tax cuts to expire as scheduled) are evil.

This lack of coherence extends beyond the deficit. Do Republicans favour state bail-outs for banks or not? If they are against them, as they protest, why are they doing everything they can to sabotage a financial-reform bill that will make them less likely? Is the party of "drill, baby, drill" in favour of tighter regulation of oil companies or not? If not, why is it berating Mr Obama for events a mile beneath the ocean? Many of America's most prominent business leaders are privately as disappointed by the right as they are by the statist Mr Obama.

Down the rabbit hole and beyond the Palin

Out of power, a party can get away with such negative ambiguity; the business of an opposition is to oppose. The real problem for the political right may well come if it wins in November. Just as the party found after it seized Congress in 1994, voters expect solutions, not just rage. The electorate jumped back into Bill Clinton's arms in 1996. Business conservatives are scouting desperately for an efficient centrist governor (or perhaps general) to run against Mr Obama in 2012. But tea-party-driven success in the mid-terms could foster the illusion that the Republicans lost the White House because Mr McCain was insufficiently close to their base. That logic is more likely to lead to Palin-Huckabee in 2012 than, say, Petraeus-Daniels.

Britain's Conservatives, cast out of power after 18 years in 1997, made that mistake, trying a succession of right-wingers. Only with the accession of the centrist David Cameron in 2005 did the party begin to recover as he set about changing its rhetoric. There may be a lesson in that for the Republicans—and it is not too late to take it.

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