

October 1, 2012

Politics and Markets

David E. McClean, PhD

The End of the Republican Party?

We are witnessing the end of the Republican Party as a major national political force. Over the next several years, the party is likely to become increasingly weakened (as it already has been weakened by the internal pathology known as the “Tea Party”) by pointless and incoherent battles fueled by nostalgia for an America that is, for many, well lost, and by paleo-federalist notions that no longer work in a country that must, if it would continue to be a potent global influence for good, prioritize American national identity over local loyalties. Since it seems impossible that the party can continue to withstand its internal cognitive dissonance, and since the party seems unwilling to reconcile itself to the demographic and cultural changes external to it, the likelihood of the diminution of the party’s power, its retreat from its present place as one of the two great parties, is more than plausible – it is probable.

A Party of Complaint and Resentment

This prediction is not written out of *Schadenfreude* or partisan pique. To the contrary, the country – any country – needs a strong conservative party. But unless Republicans can pull themselves out of their present downward glide path, address their often incoherent and warring notions of “conservatism” (which apologizes for such wildly incompatible notions as isolationism, on the one hand, and nation-building abroad, on the other), their pervasive if not dominant anti-intellectualism (where an acceptance of Darwin and possession of a Yale or Harvard degree are evidence of a break of faith with American core ideals), their tendencies toward nativism, their belief that support for a strong national defense equates with hair-trigger militarism, and their implausible attacks on “government” as such, their party may not be able to survive as more than the party of complaint and resentment – perhaps to become the American counterpart to the French *Front National*.

With the diminution of the Republican Party (it is increasingly a Southern-Western, white club, despite its sprinkling of brown faces, and a safe haven for people who think climate change is a left-wing conspiracy), the party is losing its capacity to be a standard bearer for more noble and saner conservative ideas, as well as its capacity to incubate leaders who can engage effectively on the world stage. The party’s relationship with Hispanics, women, and blacks shows the depth of the problem. Astoundingly, an NBC/Wall Street Journal poll, taken in August, found that **Mitt Romney** had absolutely no support – zero percent – among self-identified blacks. It is one thing for a major party’s candidate to have a low level of support from among a single demographic or ethnic group. That said, zero percent support from any major demographic or ethnic group is indicative of a crisis.



There are such things as noble and sane conservative ideas. I discovered them reading such thinkers as **Russell Kirk**, **William F. Buckley, Jr.**, and conservative philosopher **Roger Scruton**, to name a few. The things that these conservatives wished or wish to conserve were and are, in many but certainly not all cases, worth conserving. It used to be that conservatives warned us about erosions of the center of our national identity, lest the nation/country crumble from within; reminded us that we must be careful not to lurch forward too fast into social change, because there can be unintended consequences in doing so; trumpeted the notion that thrift and frugality are essential to our character; and advanced the proposition that politics is not merely about economics and the preservation of the engines of capitalism, but is also, as **Michael Sandel** of Harvard has reminded us, about molding citizens who understand the importance of civic virtue – the importance of giving rather than merely taking from our neighbors, our country. I have found **George F. Will's** *Statecraft as Soulcraft-What Government Does* as thought-provoking and useful a book as I have found **James Baldwin's** *The Fire Next Time*. Both books have shaped my soul as an American. But something has happened to the party of the conservatives that suggests that it has lost its way.

Part of the confusion in the party is that it seeks to defend what it takes to be the acme of American culture while it panders to economic libertarians who are guided by a gospel of individualism and personal rights rather than communitarian ideals and values. Beyond that, its decision to cleave to a certain cultural imaginary that evokes images of white men in three-pointed hats, powdered white wigs, and false narratives of halcyon days that were anything but halcyonic for millions of Chinese, Hispanic, black and even many white Americans, makes it largely impossible for many to feel at home within it, even if they might generally agree with certain conservative priorities and principles (this is, of course, why the party has failed to attract African-Americans, among others).

Until the party comes to terms with its present crisis – which would start, or course, with recognition that it *is* in crisis – there is every reason to believe that its co-dominance in American politics will fade. However, after this year's presidential election, if it can allow real leaders to emerge and re-emerge from the hiding places that the party's radical fringe has forced them into, leaders who understand all of the problems sketched and who have a plan for renewal, the Republican Party might be able to save itself from what is a probable slide into political marginality in the years and decades to come. This could happen, however unlikely it seems given the current rhetoric of many who now occupy positions of leadership.

On the other hand, self-preservation can be a rather powerful force. We will see just how powerful in the coming months and years.

Copyright © David E. McClean, 2012. All Rights Reserved. "POLINITICS" is a trademark of David E. McClean. An application for trademark protection has been filed with the United States Patent and Trademark Office. "POLINITICS" has been used in trade and commerce by the owner since 2002. Visit www.polinitics.com for archived commentaries and to subscribe.