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On Politics and Markets

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What Republicans Shouldn't Do Now

The media and public relations pro **Donny Deutsch** said last week that what Republicans need to do now is re-brand themselves. He recommended that a media campaign be started, perhaps a series of television commercials in which self-identified conservatives look into the camera (I suppose with appropriate "It's Morning in America" music as accompaniment, and Old Glory waving in the background) and say, "I am a conservative, and I believe in ____." Fill in the blank with "contraception," or "reproductive choice," or, perhaps, just "good sense." But is this the right medicine?

Public relations and re-branding won't be enough. They're too superficial. You see, it is not written in the stars that a political party must survive after it fails to be coherent and truly representative. Limiting the work that needs to be done to public relations is akin to applying cologne to a gangrenous limb. What the party actually needs now are thought leaders – people who can re-articulate a conservative philosophy and vision that makes sense for contemporary America and for the contemporary world. Years of admitted fiscal irresponsibility, adventurism, and nation-building abroad – all things that were, traditionally, anathema to conservative thought – have led to a severe identity crisis, a near complete loss of guiding principles and ideas (or perhaps better put, a betrayal of them).

For short-term convenience, the Republican party has permitted itself to be represented by hacks and know-nothings whose tools of trade are extremist rhetoric, race bating, innuendo, and fear-mongering. **Sarah Palin, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Laura Ingraham, and Dinesh D'Souza** are not the party's saviors and champions after all; they are, collectively, its cancer. This is something that many thoughtful Republicans have known for a long time, but now it seems to be a truth that is showing its teeth.

The Republican Party is dying, *viz.* as a major, national political force. This is not to say that it won't live on in some diminished form, but if it does not find a way to muzzle or at least marginalize many of its most vocal and most visual celebrity surrogates (for starters), then those in its ranks who simply don't agree with the idea that half of the country is the enemy will peel away, leaving the party a haunt of xenophobes, anti-intellectuals, nativists, racists, paternalists, regionalists, religious fundamentalists,



secessionists, and imperialists. What a line-up.

What Republicans shouldn't do now is take Donny Deutsch's advice. They must first do the hard work of self-analysis, and re-formulate a conservative message that is apt for the times – a message that can appeal to those Americans with more robust communitarian and conservative sensibilities than liberals and progressives tend to possess and exhibit.

I have no idea how the Republicans will be able to pull this off. Those who are loyal critics within the party have been blasted as RINOs. **David Brooks** has been dismissed by many in the Republican Party as more intellectual than true Republican, a bit too cozy in his "liberal" *New York Times* digs. The Laura Ingrahams and Glenn Becks will not go silently into the night (for one thing, their shtick pays too well). The coming internal battles are likely to be fierce. The end result might very well be schism and fracture.

Of course, all of this is an opportunity for Democrats. If Democrats can assume some of the more sane communitarian narratives that used to be associated with conservatives exclusively, they will continue to gain ground, and voters. This is more likely than not. It is, after all, what the Clinton-Obama wing of the Democratic party has been doing with some success since the 1990s. This, too, does not bode well for Republicans. If Republicans think Democrats don't see opportunity in Republican self-mutilation, they are sorely mistaken. That said, Democrats will be mistaken if they think that they can "go communitarian" at the expense of issues and concerns important to the base. The Republican implosion isn't just fraught with perils for Republicans. Democrats would be wise to tread carefully, too.

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