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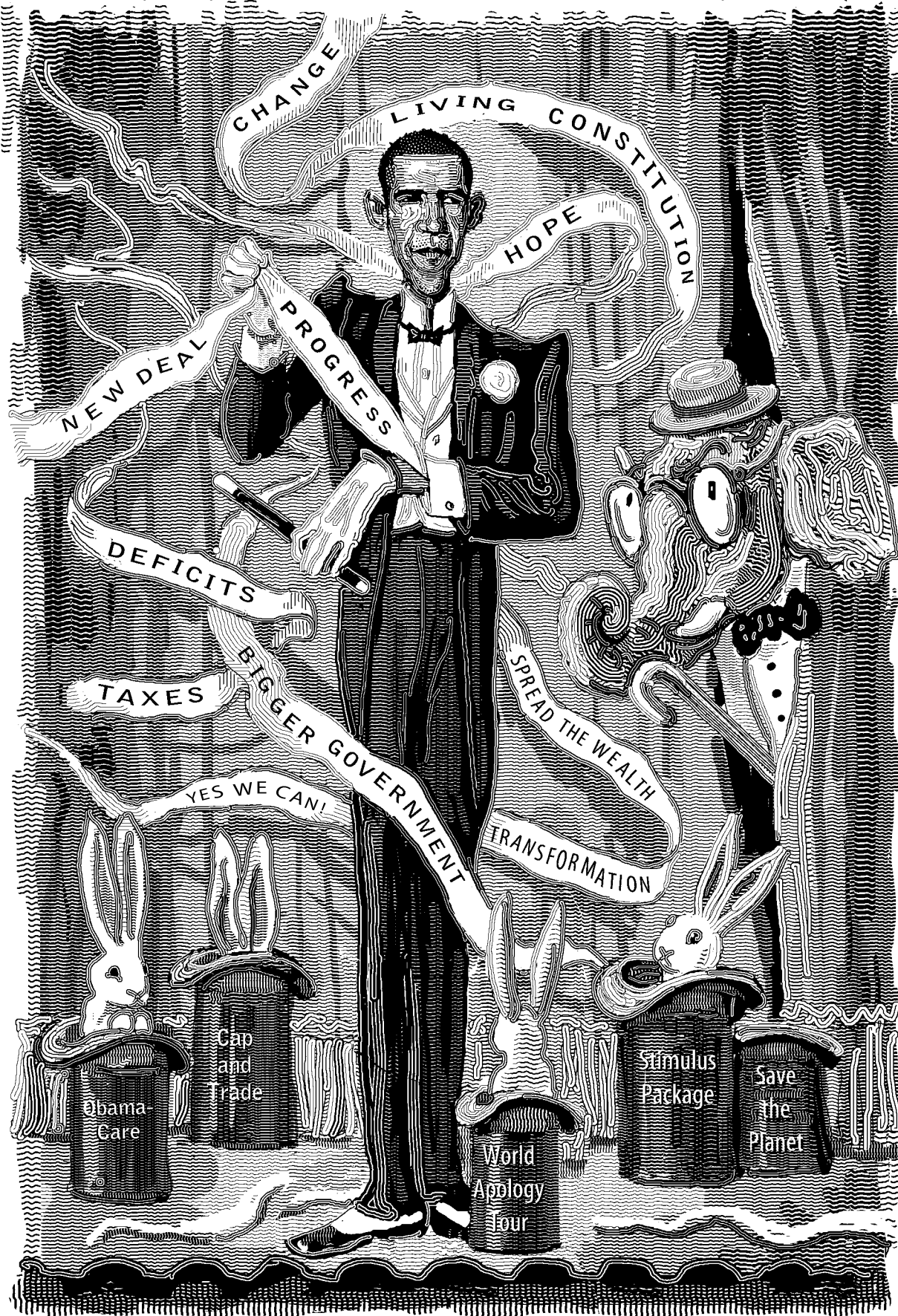
# CLAREMONT

## REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

### CONSERVATISM'S CHALLENGE

Essays by Charles R. Kesler and Henry Olsen



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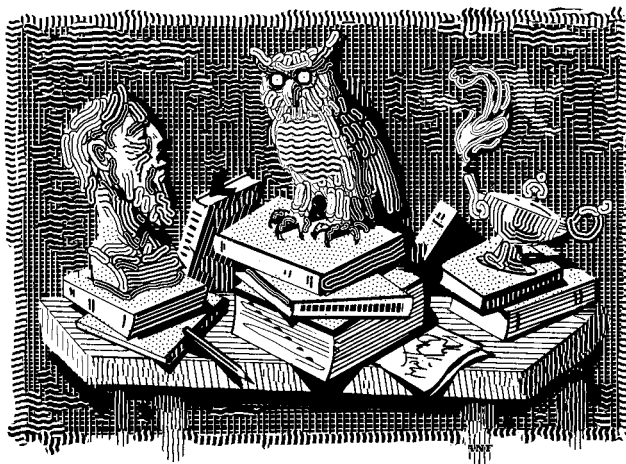
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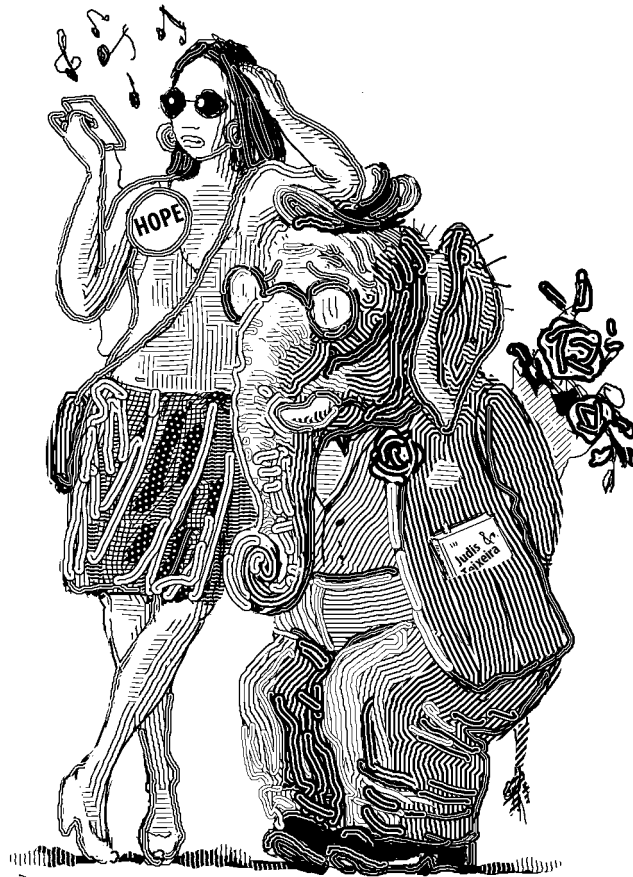
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## THE REEMERGING REPUBLICAN MAJORITY?



**E**SPECIALLY IN A DEMOCRATIC AGE, STATESMEN are careful students of social trends. They know that the art of political leadership can't afford to ignore the science of political demography, even though the former can never be reduced to the latter. Conservatives who seek a revival in their movement must exhibit similar wisdom and closely examine how America has changed since the glory days of President Ronald Reagan, and how those changes pose new challenges to, and may impose new limits on, conservatism today.

### Suburbia

**T**HE CONSERVATIVE ASCENDANCY OF THE Reagan years centered in the middle class. It wasn't just any middle class, though; conservative strength was concentrated in the modern suburb. Commonplace today, suburbs revolutionized American life. In 1940, 23% of Americans lived on farms; by 1980, only 4% did. Big cities declined too: between 1950 and 1980, cities in the North and Midwest lost millions of residents either to their own suburbs or to those in the Sunbelt. Though they began as a small, largely upper class phenomenon, the

suburbs eventually became home to nearly a majority of the American population.

Thus the key political question increasingly became: who are the suburbanites and what do they want? When Reagan was elected in 1980, most suburbanites were married with children. They were overwhelmingly Christian; overt secularism was not yet a mass force. Women had begun to enter the workforce in large numbers in the early 1970s, but the typical suburbanite still lived in a traditional, one-male-earner household. And nearly all were white. The Hispanic population, though growing, constituted only about 2% of the electorate. Asians composed an even smaller share, and African-Americans lived largely in the cities and the rural South. The cultural divisions that are now omnipresent were only beginning to appear. The typical suburbanite had been raised in a less individualistic time between the 1930s and the early '60s. The cultural politics of the baby boomer generation did not yet dominate; the oldest boomer was only 34.

In *The Making of the President, 1960*, Theodore H. White had noted the suburban rise and asked "what was to be done with this new form of civilization?" He observed that Democrats tended to view suburban life as a "torrent of self-

indulgence," while Republicans regarded it as an "expression of individual well-being." He wondered whether the suburban future would be guided "by private enterprise or by public plan."

White's alternatives were actually two sides of the same coin. Suburbanites recoiled from Barry Goldwater's assertive individualism, but they rejected the Great Society's excessive faith in government, too. This temperament reflected the socioeconomic realities of suburban life. Just as suburbs stand between the urban and the rural, in 1980 suburbanites' attitudes about economics and government occupied a middle ground between the pro-spending ethos of the cities and the anti-spending ethic of rural America (which made an exception for farm subsidies, to be sure).

Suburbanites derived their wealth from the private sector. They tended to work in private sector jobs, shopped at private sector stores, and consumed private sector goods. They moved to the suburbs to enjoy a better standard of living than they could in the city or town. Policies which disturbed this economic dynamism, such as high taxes or inflation, were unpopular. But underneath this private consumption lay various public goods. Suburbanites drove their private



cars on public roads. They and their children were mostly educated in public schools, and their property was protected by police. Even their private consumption was made possible in part by public insurance—Social Security and Medicare—which reduced the need to save for old age. Policies threatening these underpinnings of comfortable suburban life were unpopular, too.

In addition, suburbanites craved ordered liberty. They valued the uniform, sprawling developments so disparaged by critics like Lewis Mumford. These were new types of communities that permitted more individual freedom and less social supervision than their parents had known. Grateful for their single-family detached homes, they supported police and rallied to “law and order” campaigns. On international matters, they were wary of intervention but supportive of a strong foreign policy, wary of involvement in Vietnam but fearful of Soviet expansionism. Politicians who ignored major elements of this underlying consensus did so at their peril.

These trends did not go unnoticed. Kevin Phillips, in his 1969 masterpiece, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, argued that the New Deal coalition was being replaced by a conservative, Republican majority arising from the “immense middle class impetus of Sun Belt and suburbia,” fueled by opposition to the tumults of the 1960s and a liberalism that had gone “beyond programs taxing the few for the benefit of the many (the New Deal) to programs taxing the many on behalf of the few (the Great Society).”

Phillips’s prognostication carried two implicit caveats. First, this emerging conservatism was moderate. Nixon won the 1968 presidential election by winning virtually all major suburban counties outside the South, most of which Goldwater had lost by large margins in 1964. He and his successors had to reassure these voters that the GOP would not undo popular programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and aid to education. The other caveat concerned the wealthiest and most educated of these voters. Even in 1968, residents of the most prosperous suburbs were turning away from Nixon and the GOP. Phillips noted but dismissed this trend among those he called “silk-stockings Megalopolitans.” Any losses among the elites, he argued, would be more than offset by gains among the middle and working classes.

### The Reagan Coalition

**R**ONALD REAGAN WAS THE IDEAL CANDIDATE to satisfy suburban aspirations. As a young Michael Barone wrote in 1965, Reagan already emphasized “threats felt by average men with mortgaged bungalows, two-car garages, and bought-on-time lawn furniture.”

Reagan governed California in accord with suburban ideals. He cut welfare and combated the disorder flowing from the student rebellions, but left major public programs like education and road construction largely untouched. Though he tried and failed to limit the growth of government spending and taxes, he never sought to repeal the vast public edifice constructed by predecessors of both parties. As he often said, he was a former New Deal Democrat who had voted four times for Franklin Roosevelt. FDR’s legacy was safe in his hands.

Reagan also had an actor’s appreciation for his audience. By 1977, he sensed that he could build on his suburban base by reaching out to religious voters worried about changing mores. And so he proposed a “New Republican Party” comprising

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both economic and social conservatives, united around the principle of human freedom. This new party emerged full blown in 1980. His victory—only the second popular vote majority for a GOP president since 1956—rested squarely on the suburbs, crucially augmented by the new culturally conservative voters. He carried virtually every major suburban county by large margins, while also making inroads into working-class Catholic urban communities and evangelical Southern and Midwestern rural towns. Reagan’s new party was not evenly balanced between its parts, however. The bulk of its voters were still suburbanites seeking prosperity and security. His governing emphasis was accordingly placed there: cutting taxes and strengthening national defense came first; social issues, except for judicial appointments, came later, if at all.

This coalition remained at the center of American politics for the next two presidential elections. In 1984, Reagan was reelected by large margins (58.8% of the popular vote; 525

electoral votes). George H.W. Bush received 53% of the 1988 popular vote on the same demographic lines as Reagan. Most striking to the modern eye, however, is the breadth of Bush’s suburban base. The vice president carried the suburban counties of most of the major cities in the North and Midwest. He won overwhelming majorities in suburban Southern California and in the bedroom communities of gigantic Los Angeles County. He carried Miami’s Palm Beach County with 56% and swept to a 61% victory in Fairfax County, Virginia.

### The Republican Predicament

**T**ODAY, POLITICS LOOKS VERY DIFFERENT. In the 2008 presidential election, Senator John McCain carried *none* of the suburban counties surrounding New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, or Boston, and he lost most of the St. Louis and Cleveland suburbs. He lost all of Southern California’s suburban areas except rock-ribbed Orange County, which he carried with a record low 50%. Palm Beach went 61%-38% for Senator Barack Obama; Fairfax’s 60%-39% margin for Obama delivered Virginia to the Democrats for the first time since 1964.

McCain’s share of the national popular vote also signaled trouble. On the surface, his total, 45.6%, seemed respectable. Many Republican presidential candidates had received less in recent memory. But all of those candidates save one, Barry Goldwater, had run races with serious third-party candidates. Goldwater aside, McCain’s showing was the worst GOP result in a two-party race since Wendell Willkie garnered 44.8% in 1940. To look at it another way, Obama’s 52.9% was the second-highest for a non-incumbent Democrat in American history, trailing only FDR’s 57.4% in 1932.

It’s tempting to blame the 2008 election results on the times. The September financial crash would have hurt any incumbent party, particularly among suburbanites whose portfolios plummeted and whose home equity nose-dived. Not surprisingly, McCain’s decline from George W. Bush’s 2004 vote share was often larger in congressional districts most affected by the housing collapse, e.g., in Central and Southern California and Nevada. Nor should one ignore the role events played in elevating one set of concerns above another. In the 1990s, with the world at peace and economic growth solid, voters cared more about cultural issues. Clinton’s triangulation—for the V-chip and school uniforms but also for abortion rights, against tax hikes but also against cutting government programs—played well in the suburbs, especially among the “soccer moms” who briefly became the national rage. After September 11, voters cared more about international

affairs and security than they had in 1996 and 2000. President Bush thus did well in the suburbs, especially among the “security moms” his campaign wooed. But even the 9/11 effect did not help *everywhere*. Bush’s 2004 vote share increased most strikingly in the suburbs of New York City most affected by 9/11. His share of the vote remained stagnant, or dropped, in many highly-educated suburban districts outside the South.

### The Democratic Resurgence

THE SUBURBAN DRIFT AWAY FROM THE GOP proceeded steadily throughout the 1990s and the present decade. The 2008 results largely conformed to this new political-demographic pattern, one identified and analyzed in a book that looked out of place in 2001 but soon proved prescient: John Judis and Ruy Teixeira’s *The Emerging Democratic Majority*.

The authors, two men of the Left, argued provocatively that demographic changes would usher in a Democratic majority by the end of the decade. They noted that Americans were increasingly college-educated and producing ideas rather than making things. Such voters valued economic growth but also “embraced a libertarian ethic of personal life.” Meanwhile, women, particularly single or college-educated women, were flocking to the Democratic Party, and non-whites were voting Democratic in overwhelming numbers, also. Judis and Teixeira contended that all three groups were becoming larger parts of the population and would soon be large enough to produce a new political order.

Their predictions were eerily accurate. They projected that minorities, who cast 10% of the nation’s votes in 1972 and 19% in 2000, would cast a quarter by decade’s end. The 2008 exit poll confirmed that non-whites composed 26% of the electorate; McCain lost these voters by 79% to 18%. Democrats, they thought, would continue to win votes from areas dominated by professionals and educated women. Looking at what they called “ideopolises”—metropolitan areas that are economically open to technology, i.e., virtually every major suburban county—they found that in 1984, 55% of the professional class had voted for Reagan. But in 2000, educated professionals went for Gore 55%-41%, and in 2008, for Obama about 60%-38%. Judis and Teixeira even predicted which states would move toward the Democrats by decade’s end. Every state Obama gained from Bush was on their list, except Indiana.

It’s not hard to explain this Democratic resurgence. Suburban residents grew steadily wealthier and more educated during the past two decades—and the trends were related, because since 1980 the educated class has disproportionately captured income gains. These devel-

opments created a mass affluent class—the McMansion set satirized by David Brooks in *Bo-bos in Paradise* (2000)—which had been on the political sidelines in 1980. Phillips sneered at those he called “silk stocking Megalopolitans,” but today’s non-Southern suburbs are politically dominated by their sentiments.

Nor is it hard to see why culture joined economics as an important political issue. The baby boomer generation defines itself by its “culture,” and by the mid-1990s the typical suburbanite was someone who had become an adult in the ’60s and ’70s. Once this class made up a large percentage of the electorate, lifestyle issues rose in political importance. Baby boomers who embraced the social changes of their youth sought to defend and extend them; those who opposed them were equally determined to defend traditional mores. Hence began the now commonplace demographic correlation between voting behavior and degree of religious observance. The growing divide between religious and secular voters arose not because religious Americans sought to impose theocracy or because secular Americans sought to stamp out belief. Rather, modern Americans increasingly embraced or rejected a specific faith, even religion itself, because of its stance on cultural matters.

As a result, the Republican presidential electorate is now tilted toward culturally conservative voters much more than it was in the 1980s. McCain won 55%-43% among the 40% of voters who said they attend religious services at least weekly. He lost 57%-42% among those who said they attend occasionally, and he was clobbered 67%-30% among those who never attend.

To make the point more starkly, McCain carried white evangelicals 74%-24%. They constituted 26% of the electorate, and fully 42% of his vote. Non-believers, on the other hand, cast 12% of the votes and went solidly for Obama, 75%-23%. Jews and believers who are neither Protestant nor Catholic amounted to another 8% of voters and supported Obama 75%-22%.

The overall picture is thus sobering for conservatives and Republicans. Democrats are strongest in the most rapidly expanding segments of the population, and every four years natural growth in these groups can be expected to add one or two points to Obama’s 7.25% margin of victory. How can Republicans possibly find their way back?

### A Republican Strategy

THEY CAN START BY RECOGNIZING THAT the GOP’s base has changed since the 1980s. Remember, 42% of McCain’s vote came from white evangelicals. Another 13% came from observant Catholics. Not all of these voters are social conservatives, but many

of them qualify. A party platform that does not prominently address the moral concerns animating these voters will not unite the base. But social conservatives cannot win by themselves. Social and economic conservatives need to realize that Reagan’s vision of a new party has finally come to pass. Both halves of the party are roughly in balance, and neither can succeed without the other. They must hang together, or they will most assuredly hang separately.

The question is whether a united base will, or can be made to, appeal to suburbanites outside the Deep South. Neither a presidential nor a congressional majority can be formed solely from Southern and rural states. Even in the South, Northern-style suburbs—as in Northern Virginia, North Carolina’s Research Triangle, and Central Florida’s I-4 Corridor—now hold their state’s balance of electoral power.

Nixon’s and Reagan’s successful suburban outreach required a subtle appreciation for what American suburbanites wanted, economically and culturally. A successful modern suburban outreach requires a similar appreciation. Suburban cultural life is nowadays a mixture of the traditional and the liberated. Suburban men and women may have had liaisons prior to marriage, but once they tie the knot they have extremely low divorce rates. Women work, but most work part-time and juggle motherhood and professional life in a harried, unsatisfying combination. Though they may have experimented with marijuana in their youth, suburban parents are fiercely anti-drug today. Most importantly, they are by no means complete moral agnostics, however much they may profess to be “nonjudgmental.” They have no problem teaching their children the virtues of honesty, marital fidelity, and hard work.

This cultural message is consistent with the rhetoric of individual choice, which dominates the suburban mentality. The typical suburban adult wants to make good choices, but he or she rarely wants to be hectored or prevented from making bad ones. All too often, conservatives (Republican politicians are much less guilty of this, incidentally) have spoken in sectarian and admonishing tones, like the temperance advocates criticized in Abraham Lincoln’s famous Temperance Address (1842) for seeking moral reform with “thundering tones of anathema and denunciation.” Conservatives who seek to reform mores and appeal to the modern suburbanite must adopt Lincoln’s maxim that “a drop of honey catches more flies than a gallon of gall” and employ “kind, unassuming persuasion” in pursuit of their ends.

Abortion is an example of a moral issue on which conservatives have made some headway in recent years, precisely because pro-life advocates have focused less on condemning the act

of terminating a pregnancy and more on garnering sympathy for the unborn child. As Ross Douthat wrote recently, “the pro-life movement is arguably more comfortable with the language of rights and liberties than its opponents.” Public attitudes have changed as a result. Polls show that young people are more pro-life than are their parents, and a recent Pew poll found that pro-life and pro-choice sentiments are roughly equal, a dramatic change from the norm of the last 35 years.

Conservative economic policy must adopt a balanced tone and ambition, too. Suburbanites remain committed to the traditional mix of private and public goods. Newt Gingrich often contrasts the private world that works with the public world that doesn’t, comparing, say, FedEx’s ability to keep track of millions of packages daily with the federal government’s inability to police illegal immigration. Market principles can make a difference in public policy, he argues. That is the touchstone of a successful suburban appeal: low taxes, but not no taxes; limited, but also effective, government.

Even today’s more Democratic-leaning suburbanites value prosperity. They have spent the last quarter-century reaping the benefits of globalization and private sector economic growth, and there is little evidence that their desire to become wealthier has abated. Thus, tax hikes

remain unpopular even in the face of massive budget shortfalls, as the recent defeat of the tax-raising referenda in California demonstrates. Politically smart Democrats recognize this, which is why President Obama’s budget plan ostensibly exempts most suburbanites from the proposed increases, and even liberal Democratic states like Maryland, New York, and New Jersey have limited their recent income tax hikes to families with incomes well above most suburban voters’. Politically smart Republicans, however, recognize that opposing tax hikes is not enough. Suburbanites want their public services to work effectively, too. Republicans who understand this, like Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, employ market principles to deliver better public services. For example, he responded to the demand for more and better roads not by hiking sales or gas taxes, as other governors have done. Instead, he auctioned off the Indiana Toll Road to a private company for \$3.8 billion, money the state will use to finance road maintenance and construction without higher taxes. He also reformed Medicaid by moving toward a system of Health Savings Accounts for the poor.

These proposals were not initially popular, but he stuck with them—and was handsomely rewarded. In an awful GOP year, Governor Daniels cruised to re-election with 58% of the

vote, about 9% more than Senator McCain got in losing Indiana for the GOP for the first time since 1964. The governor ran farthest ahead of McCain in the Indianapolis suburbs, especially in Hamilton (+23%) and Marion (+21%) counties. Daniels also did substantially better than McCain in counties with large student populations such as Purdue University’s Tippecanoe County (+18%) and Indiana-Bloomington’s Monroe County (+14%).

A national agenda to reform government in line with market principles should resonate with suburban voters—e.g., a health policy that encourages people to own their own insurance policies, thereby enabling them to choose their own doctors. Similarly, an education policy that focuses less on mandatory testing for basics and more on allowing parents to choose the teachers and curricula best suited to their children should also appeal. Finally, conservatives cannot forget that the financial crisis has given rise to a renewed desire for financial security: suburbanites who have spent their entire lives enjoying a relatively steady accumulation of wealth have been shocked by the steep and rapid depletion of their assets. Failure to address their legitimate worries could cost conservatives as much as liberals’ dismissal of popular anxiety over crime cost them in the 1980s.

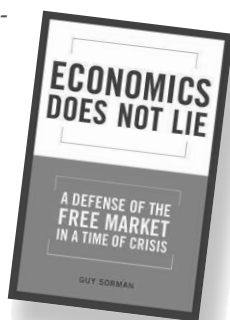
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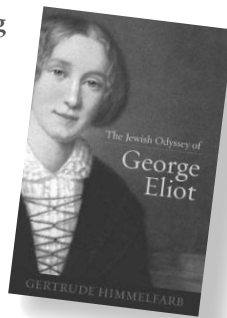


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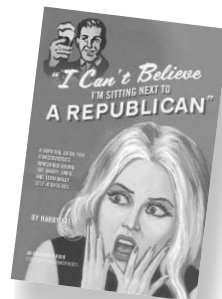
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## Reagan's Children

EDUCATION, CLASS, AND RACE CAN'T BE ignored when thinking about the GOP's future, to be sure. Whites without a four-year college degree composed between 40 and 50% of the electorate in 2008. Although modern suburbs are dominated by the college-educated, the working-class voter (who does not hold a four-year college degree) and especially the white working-class voter, is still important. Indeed, Judis and Teixeira erroneously predicted that West Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri would swing Democratic because of such voters. Instead, these states went Republican (at the presidential level) in 2004 and 2008. Judis and Teixeira had assumed working-class voters would continue to be attracted by the Democrats' economic populism and the party's old-fashioned "identification with the 'common man and woman'" that "has been a defining difference between the Democrats and Whigs, and the Democrats and Republicans, since the 1830s." But their failed predictions call this assumption into question.

Populism need not be directed against Big Business alone. The essence of populism is the belief that an unworthy elite whom you cannot control has control over you, and that government can redress that grievance. Wall Street bailouts that enrich corrupt elites enrage working-class voters. Non-payment of taxes by administration appointees fuels the common man's suspicion that government is not on his side. Add the economic pressure he will soon feel from the Obama Administration's aggressive pursuit of its environmental and immigration agendas, and one can see how Republicans could begin to recapture the populist mantle for themselves.

Of course, the GOP already wins white working-class voters by a large margin. Ruy Teixeira recently estimated that McCain carried this group by 18%, not much less than the 23% margin achieved by George W. Bush in 2004. Regaining an electoral majority through a working-class strategy alone, however, would

require GOP margins of 30% or more, without losing ground among other voting groups. Besides, the white working class is a shrinking portion of the electorate. A Republican Party that focused on consistently winning an ever increasing share of this declining segment of the electorate would be an entirely different party from the one we currently have. If it is to be the majority party again, the GOP must be able to win again in the suburbs while taking as much as it can of the white working class vote, which tends to be rural and urban.

Of course, suburban America is no longer lily white. The Asians of California's Cupertino and Monterey Park, the African-Americans of Maryland's Prince George's County, and the Hispanics of Florida's I-4 Corridor are prime examples of the racial and ethnic transformation of the suburbs. This trend will only continue: recent Census estimates show that 34% of the American population is non-white, with that share rising to 44% among children.

One cannot overstate the importance of this trend for future GOP prospects. Recall that McCain received only 18% of the non-white vote, which constituted 26% of the electorate. To have reached a popular majority under these circumstances, he would have needed 61% of the white vote, something Republicans have managed only twice since 1928 (the landslide years of 1972 and 1984). What's more, non-white voters will be at least 30% of the electorate by 2016. Among non-whites, George W. Bush did the best in 2004 of any GOP nominee since exit polling began in 1972. If the 2016 GOP nominee were to perform this well among blacks, Asians, and Hispanics (adjusting for each's projected share of the electorate), he would win 28.5% of the non-white vote. To win a popular majority, he would still have to win 59% of the white vote, a total last reached by George H.W. Bush in 1988.

Many conservatives argue that the approach to non-white voters should be through the social issues, because most Hispanics are pro-life Catholics and most Asian families are close-knit and pro-business. They argue that these voters


are like the Reagan Democrats who joined the New Republican Party in the '70s and '80s. But it may not be that simple. The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey found that 62% of Asian-Americans are non-Christians, which may complicate conservative cultural appeals to them. Hispanic cultural conservatism can also be exaggerated. A recent National Center for Health Statistics report found that Hispanic women have higher non-marital birth rates than do black, Asian, or white women. And though Hispanics are reliably pro-life, they have yet to respond to the GOP's pro-life stand. Their failure to vote like observant white Catholics, who themselves are significantly less likely to vote Republican than observant white evangelicals, suggests they are less motivated by moral and religious themes than by concerns over the economy and education.

But there is evidence that Hispanic and Asian voters in the suburbs do resonate to national security issues. Only twice since 1980 have Republican presidential candidates received close to 40% of the Hispanic vote—in 1984 and 2004. In the latter year, President Bush also received 41% of the Asian vote. In both cases, the GOP candidate was an incumbent president from a Southwestern state who had taken strong military action and was effusively patriotic.

America's greatest conservatives, Abraham Lincoln and Ronald Reagan, were careful students of public opinion and demographic trends. Each adapted America's timeless conservative principles, rooted in the Declaration of Independence, to their times and their audiences. They created new political coalitions that endured well beyond their elections. Republicans today must learn from their example and create a rhetoric and politics that appeal both to the party base and the new American suburbanites. To become Reagan's heir, the aspiring conservative statesman must first understand Reagan's children.

*Henry Olsen is vice president of the American Enterprise Institute and director of the National Research Initiative.*





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