



The crumbling GOP base

Jeff Jacoby

Colaboraciones n°1010

June 15, 2006

Like a lot of conservatives, I won't be voting Republican in the congressional elections this fall. Admittedly, I won't have a choice -- in Massachusetts, Republican candidates for Congress generally spare voters the trouble of defeating them by not bothering to run in the first place.

But millions of conservatives will have a choice. And the closer Election Day draws, the clearer it becomes that plenty of them will choose not to vote Republican. Unless something changes dramatically -- and soon -- the GOP is poised to lose its most reliable voters, and with them any hope of keeping its congressional majority. How disgruntled is the party's base? In recent polls, fewer than 70 percent of registered Republicans said they approve of the way President Bush is handling his job, a sharp drop from the 90 percent support on which he once could count. Among

self-identified conservatives, Bush's standing is even lower: Just 51 percent rate his performance favorably, according to the latest New York Times/CBS poll. At a time when the president's support among Democrats has shrunk to single digits, and when only 1 independent in 4 gives him a positive job rating, the last thing he can afford to lose is the goodwill of his core supporters. But he is losing it.

And Congress is doing even worse. According to the most recent CBS News poll, while 59 percent of the public disapproves of the way the House and Senate are functioning, the figure among Republicans is 62 percent. Read that again: Republicans dislike the Republican-controlled Congress even more than Democrats and independents do.

Liberals and Democrats who grow apoplectic when talking about Republican governance in Washington

must find it weirdly gratifying to see conservatives and GOP loyalists spitting nails when they talk about them, too. National Review, the influential conservative journal, depicts "A View of Congress" on the cover of its May 22 issue with a large, unflattering photo of an elephant's rear end. Inside, editor-in-chief Rich Lowry and Washington editor Kate O'Beirne write: "The Republican majority has lately been notable for its bungling, fecklessness, self-serving defensiveness, and hysteria -- sometimes all at once."

Many on the right are no less acid in describing Bush. One conservative commentator described him recently as a "dime-store Democrat" and "something of an embarrassment" and wrote that "a Republican president and a Republican Congress have lost control of the federal budget and cannot resist the temptation to stop raiding the public fisc." It says something about Bush's willingness to listen to such criticism that the author of those words -- Tony Snow -- has just become the White House spokesman.

But it will take more than merely listening to its critics for the Republican Party to stanch the hemorrhaging of its base.

Reaganite conservatives have been the mainstay of the GOP for more than 20 years, and many of them are disgusted with the abandonment of Reaganite principles at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. If they had wanted skyrocketing budgets, new federal bureaucracies, more regulation of political speech, and stale-

mates on immigration, energy, and Social Security, they say, they would have voted for Democrats. Instead they voted for Republicans -- and what did they get? Skyrocketing budgets, new federal bureaucracies, more regulation of political speech, and stalemates on immigration, energy, and Social Security.

Though the conservatives' exasperation isn't new, it was muted after Sept. 11 to preserve a common front in the war on terrorism. But now the pot is boiling over. Conservatives are shifting into Howard Beale mode: They're mad as hell and not going to take it anymore. Many may simply sit out the election this November, even if that means letting Democrats take over Congress. Maybe then, they reason, Bush will remember why the Constitution gives him a veto. And maybe then Republican officeholders will remember why they were elected.

For the party's Reaganite core, the list of outrages is a long one, everything from steel tariffs to McCain-Feingold to gasoline demagoguery. Most troubling of all has been the explosive growth in the size and cost of government. On Bush's watch, the federal budget has grown twice as fast as during the Clinton years. Expenditures this year will come to nearly \$24,000 per household -- the most, in real terms, since World War II. Not since Lyndon Johnson was in the White House has spending soared so recklessly.

In the election campaign of 1994, the first item on the Republican manifesto -- the Contract With America --

was to control the federal budget. "Isn't it time we hold Congress accountable?" they asked. "The American people demand responsibility . . . The spending madness must

stop." To a lot of voters in 1994, that sounded like an excellent idea. Twelve years later, it still does.