
The Election, the GOP—and Iraq

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THE SWIFT, steep decline in Republican fortunes over the past few years has induced a state of vertigo in the party's body politic. Its elected officials, *eminences grises*, and rank-and-file members are all disoriented by the rapid plunge in the party's standing with the American people—just at the moment when they have to present the best possible case that their presidential candidate, and everyone who appears with him on the Republican ballot, are the proper stewards of the country's future.

Among Republican politicians, the funk set in after the midterm congressional elections in 2006, when Democrats took back control of the Senate and House of Representatives. Having grown comfortable in power over the course of a dozen years,* Republicans on Capitol Hill not only have found themselves coping with the ignominy of minority but have lately been assured by analysts that there is little or no chance of regaining the majority in either chamber over the course of the next three biennial elections.

The prospect of remaining powerless for at least six more years has proved so depressing that, by the end of this January, nineteen Republican House members had already announced they would not stand for reelection. Democrats have

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an excellent chance of winning at least half of those seats in November—which really does make the prospect of a Republican restoration in 2010 science-fictional.

As for the Senate, six of its Republicans are also retiring, and Democrats are favored to pick up at least two of the newly open seats. This pushes the possibility of a shift in control of the Senate even farther into the future than is the case with the House.

The despairing condition of the party's elected leadership has been mirrored this year in the low turnout of Republican voters in early presidential caucuses and primaries. In South Carolina, for example, 90,000 more Democrats than Republicans cast ballots for their preferred candidate—this, in a state that George Bush carried in 2004 by seventeen points. In New Hampshire, the gap between Democratic and Republican ballots cast was 52,000; in Iowa, there were 106,000 more Democratic than Republican caucus-goers. Since both Iowa and New Hampshire have bounced back and forth between candidates in recent elections,† this is another decidedly unfavorable portent for the GOP. If Republicans tacitly conclude that Iowa and New Hampshire are lost, they will end up assuring

* Between 1995 and 2007, the only interruption in GOP control of the Senate occurred between June 2001 and November 2002 when the liberal Republican James Jeffords became an independent and cast his vote with the Democrats, thus permitting them a majority.

† Iowa went for Al Gore in 2000 but for Bush in 2004, while New Hampshire chose Bush in 2000 but John Kerry in 2004.

an instant, if tiny, edge to the Democrats of eleven electoral votes, while granting the Democratic presidential contender the freedom to focus his or her resources and energy elsewhere.

The evident failure of Republican candidates to generate much enthusiasm among voters is an especially ominous development given the unique qualities of the 2008 election. Never before in the history of contemporary presidential politics—in which rank-and-file party members choose the victor in statewide contests rather than delegating the choice to backroom bosses—has there been an open slot at the top of the ticket in both parties. In every previous election season since 1952, a sitting President has run for reelection or his Vice President has run to succeed him. As a result, the party in power, with its candidate all but chosen beforehand, usually plays to a less engaged electorate during primary season. That is not the case this year, a fact to which the Democratic party responded with its most interesting primary battle in 40 years between the most serious female candidate in American history and the most serious African-American candidate in American history.

The Republican field could never have provoked the same degree of excitement—its only comparable claim to originality has been the presence in the race of the most serious Mormon candidate in American history—but, even so, it did comprise an uncommonly varied group of politicians from across the party's ideological spectrum. In 2007, moreover, those candidates conducted a series of debates notable for their specificity and their high level of argumentation. And yet, by January 2008, only 53 percent of Republican voters (compared with 76 percent of Democrats) professed themselves happy with their choices for President.

THERE ARE TWO possible explanations for the decline in Republican involvement. The first, and most obvious, is fatalism—a sense of hopelessness about the upcoming election traceable to a perception of the other side's inevitable victory. There is strong evidence for this in the inability of Republican candidates in 2007 to come anywhere close to the Democrats in raising money. Between them, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama received \$100 million more in campaign contributions than all ten Republican candidates combined.

The second, and more telling, possibility is that there may simply be fewer Republicans in this presidential go-around. Just prior to the 2004 election, 37 percent of American voters, the highest number ever recorded, described themselves as Re-

publican. Early polling in 2008 put the number of self-identified Republicans at about 25 percent.

True, the actual decline may turn out to be not quite so dramatic as this looks. People claim membership in a party, then drop the claim, then pick it up again. Thus, at the same early point in 2004, the Republican number was 28 percent, only to grow by one-third over the ten months leading up to the election. If one assumes the same growth in 2008, then 34 percent of American voters will identify themselves as Republicans in the final pre-election poll.

But that would still represent a loss since 2004 of every ninth Republican voter. The threat to the GOP is not that those seven million people will side with the Democrats, but that they will not go to the polls at all. Should that happen, Republicans unquestionably will lose—just as George W. Bush would have lost to John Kerry, and by a similar margin, in 2004.

Republicans received an early warning of things to come in November 2006, when the total GOP vote fell 4 percent below the previous midterm election in 2002. That marked a decline of 1.5 million voters, and a sharp reversal of a trend that had instilled confidence in Republicans about their supposedly iron hold on the American electorate.

The confidence was not entirely misplaced. Nationwide voting totals for the GOP had grown by leaps and bounds over the previous three elections. In 2000, Bush garnered eleven million more votes than Bob Dole had won in 1996, a jump of 25 percent.* In the 2002 midterm election, congressional Republicans augmented their total from the previous midterm by fourteen points nationwide. In 2004, Bush's vote grew by another 22 percent. These impressive gains, following hard upon the GOP's momentous victory in the 1994 midterm elections when the party won 52 House seats and eight Senate seats, seemed to presage an enduring shift toward the GOP.

Some Republicans and conservatives began to speculate that the march of history in their direction was unstoppable. The population of the United States, they would point out, was transforming itself geographically and demographically in ways that could only ballast and bolster the GOP for decades to come. The Northeast and the Rust Belt, both Democratic strongholds, were slowly emptying out as jobs and people moved south and west to solid Republican states where the new arrivals were

* Even if one adds every one of Ross Perot's eight million votes to Dole's in 1996, Bush still bested their combined total by four million, or 10 percent.

happy to find not only balmy weather but a more conservative political atmosphere.

Meanwhile, the Democratic party was ever more perceptibly becoming the province of singles—the never married, the divorced, the widowed—as well as the elderly. These people were obviously not reproducing at a high rate, if at all. By contrast, married couples, especially those with children, were increasingly voting Republican, and their children would be likely to do so as well. Even among Hispanics, the fastest-growing segment of the population, there was hope for a Republican future thanks to their strong family orientation and generally conservative values.

The political strategist Karl Rove marshaled such bits of data and many others like them as he worked toward the creation of a “permanent Republican majority.” The data were seductive, as only data can be that show one’s side winning. But they were also seriously misleading. In 2006, the geographic and demographic makeup of the American electorate was little different from what it had been four years earlier, and yet the number of votes cast for Democrats grew by 25 percent. Voters are not collector’s items to be hoarded and sealed in plastic by the parties they vote for. They are free individuals whose views and preferences are subject to change. And change they did.

THE QUESTION is why they changed, and the search for an answer to that question has necessarily become a preoccupation on the Right.

One body of opinion assigns the primary responsibility to the corruption-and-morality scandals that beset the Republican party beginning in 2005. A Texas prosecutor indicted Tom DeLay, the second-ranking Republican in the House, for alleged campaign-finance irregularities; the indictment forced DeLay to resign his seat. A San Diego congressman tearfully confessed to taking bribes in the millions from a defense contractor, and was hauled off to jail for eight years. The machinations of the lobbyist Jack Abramoff led to the guilty pleas of an Ohio congressman and his chief of staff on bribery charges, and of two mid-level executive-branch officials for obstruction of justice. A Florida House member resigned after ABC News disclosed salacious e-mails and instant messages he had sent to a teenage boy who had once been a congressional page. And I. Lewis Libby, the chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney, was found guilty on highly convoluted perjury and obstruction-of-justice charges stemming from the revelation of a CIA officer’s name in a newspaper column.

That in at least two of these cases—DeLay’s and Libby’s—the prosecution was politicized to an unholy degree was immaterial. This was an ongoing cascade of news involving Republicans and courtrooms, indictments, guilty pleas, guilty verdicts, and resignations, and its effect over time was corrosive.

A second, related, body of opinion holds that the GOP had become *politically* corrupt in the twelve years following its takeover of Capitol Hill. Known for preaching fiscal prudence and limited government, the Republican party turned its back on these core precepts to rain taxpayer dollars on constituents in the form of pork-barrel spending. In 1995, the party’s first year in power, principled Republicans had slashed the number of earmarks—that is, specific bits of federal spending targeted at individual congressional districts—from 4,200 to 1,300. In the following year they cut the number from 1,300 to 958. But in 1998, with both Bill Clinton and the GOP reeling from the fallout of the Monica Lewinsky revelations, Republican politicians desperately sought, like Democrats of old, to buy voter fealty through earmarks. The number jumped to 2,000, and from there continued to climb year by year until it reached a staggering 14,000 in 2005.

According to this analysis, the resulting spectacle was more than conservative voters could stomach. Rather than agreeing to provide an implicit approval of conduct they reviled, they just stayed home. “We forgot why the American people sent us to Washington,” Senator John McCain would say in his campaign stump speech by way of explaining the party’s 2006 setback.

This dual portrait of far-reaching corruption, personal and political, is of a piece with the most substantive self-criticism on the Right: that during their time in power, Republicans lost their philosophical and ideological moorings. Instead of limiting the size or reach of government, they acquiesced in or led the way to its expansion.

The litany here is long. In 2001, the Bush White House joined with liberal Democrats in a piece of education legislation, No Child Left Behind, that boldly inserted the federal government into what historically had been for the most part an enterprise of states and localities. In 2002, Bush signed the McCain-Feingold campaign-finance bill, which set severe limits on political speech during the two months leading up to an election. In 2003, the Republican-led House and Senate pushed through a new entitlement program providing prescription drugs to the elderly, with DeLay using

unethical strong-arm tactics to force skeptical conservative House members into compliance. Finally, in 2006, Bush and the Republican leadership enraged the party's core supporters with their aggressive advocacy of an immigration bill weighted toward finding a way for undocumented aliens to remain in the United States, and inadequate at best in laying out a strategy to limit or end illegal immigration altogether.

IT IS undeniable that all these problems played a part both in depressing Republican turnout in 2006—convincing independent voters who had hitherto sided with the GOP into pulling the lever for the Democrats—and in rallying Democratic passions. But the thesis that Republicans failed in 2006 and may be doomed to failure in 2008 *because* of them is highly questionable.

The corruption scandals on Capitol Hill were serious, and the DeLay indictment in particular felled a very powerful Republican. But DeLay resigned from the House six months before the 2006 election. Of the other 228 GOP members in 2006, only five were caught up in scandals.* A Republican voter satisfied with his own representative's personal conduct would be unlikely to cast a vote against him in a close race on account of the ephemerophilic flirtations of a member from Florida.

There was, moreover, little or no evidence that the turn away from the seventeen incumbents who lost their House seats in 2006 was owing to anger over their voting record on spending, earmarks, Bush-era expansion of government, or immigration. Indeed, one of the House's two most virulent *opponents* of immigration, J.D. Hayworth of Arizona, lost his own reelection bid by four points.

The problem with the conventional diagnoses of the GOP's diminished condition is that they are themselves polemical in nature. Though they are offered to explain the disaster of 2006, their larger purpose is to direct the party's future conduct, by aligning it more closely with the ideological predilections of the critics. Those critics have a point, and a good one: a spendthrift Republican party too long in power will indeed tend toward the brazen conduct of Democratic Congresses past. But this alone cannot account for the unambiguous and wholesale dismissal of the GOP from the leadership of Congress.

For a midterm election, what happened in 2006 was an uncommon event: a national wave. In the past half-century, there have been only two others like it, the first in 1974 when Democrats won 75 seats in the House and four in the Senate and the

second in 1994. In all three cases, there was a single, identifiable, overwhelming reason for the loss. The 1974 election occurred in the wake of Watergate. The 1994 election took place in the wake of the effort by the Clinton administration to nationalize health care. And the 2006 election? It was decided not because of a few corrupt Republicans, or because Congress had spent a great deal, or because of a flawed immigration measure. It was decided by the fact that the United States was on the verge of suffering a cataclysmic defeat in war.

THE WAR in Iraq has been the dominant issue in American politics since September 2002, when Bush first took Saddam Hussein's failure to comply with United Nations resolutions to the UN General Assembly. In 2004, John Kerry chose to make the war the focus of his own campaign against Bush. The President, contravening the advice given to him by many old GOP hands, accepted Kerry's challenge and turned his reelection into a referendum on the decision to go to war.

Nothing came along after 2004 to dislodge Iraq as the central issue. To the contrary: throughout Bush's second term, ideas and attitudes about the war consciously and unconsciously leached into domestic politics. The most notable event in that period was the devastation of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina in September 2005. In the wake of Katrina, fairly or unfairly, the political image of Bush and his administration that gained purchase was one of bumbling incompetence and indifference—and it gained purchase in part because of the increasingly distressing nature of the news from Iraq.

Frank Rich of the *New York Times* laid out the case:

If you had to put a date on when the Iraq war did in the Bush administration, it would be late summer 2005. That's when the bungled federal response to Hurricane Katrina re-enacted the White House bungling of the war, this time with Americans as the principal victims. The stuff happening . . . in New Orleans was recognizably the same stuff that had happened on Donald Rumsfeld's watch in Baghdad.

For Left-liberals like Rich, Katrina was a fulfillment of their darkest expectations. Their view of Bush and his war had already hardened into concrete by the close of 2004: a *Washington Post* poll in

* Aside from those already mentioned, a congressman from New York made a tipsy pass at a constituent and a Congressman from California had a glancing involvement with Abramoff.

December of that year found an astonishing 83 percent of Democrats saying the war had not been worth it. For antiwar advocates convinced of the apodictic certainty of their view, the federal response to Katrina afforded just another if particularly weighty item in their bill of particulars.

Meanwhile, for many of those who had supported the war, the Katrina crisis signified something far more disturbing. Having watched despairingly as roadside bombs and improvised explosive devices in Iraq did their monstrous work on a daily basis, they had already begun to entertain severe misgivings. Support for the war, which was at 50 percent nationally at the end of 2004, sank through 2005, almost entirely due to changes of heart among independent voters. And it was these independents who fled the farthest from Bush after Katrina. Washington's response to the catastrophe suggested to them that Bush did not know what he was doing—and therefore that the trust they had shown him in 2004 had been misplaced.

"This will take time and patience," Bush said of Iraq in 2005. But not until November of that year did he attempt to present an explicit "Strategy for Victory." And that document simply repackaged the administration's existing approach, envisioning not a battlefield defeat of the enemy but a gradual withering-away thanks to progress on the political and economic fronts and enhanced training of Iraqi troops.

As a matter of military strategy, as Bush would concede after the 2006 election, this was a flawed approach. It was also flawed as a matter of wartime leadership. In the realm of public opinion, a war must be won and an enemy must be defeated; for a nation with men fighting on foreign soil, there can be no other major goal. And there was worse. Bush had prevailed in 2004 by offering the implicit promise of winning in Iraq. But then, with great fanfare, he had announced that the great project of his second term would be—an effort to restructure Social Security. He had no mandate for such a thing, and the refusal of Republicans on Capitol Hill to line up behind it was a harbinger of similar discontents to come.

In October 2005, one month after Katrina, the President made the ill-advised decision to nominate his White House counsel Harriet Miers for a Supreme Court vacancy. This caused an eruption in elite conservative opinion, and he was forced to withdraw the nomination (while claiming that she was the one who dropped out). Miers was indeed a poor choice, but under different circumstances Bush would have had little difficulty in assuring her

confirmation. What made the conservative revolt possible was not her lack of credentials but Bush's gradual loss of standing in his own party—a loss due entirely to the sense that he might be flying blind in Iraq.

He was even more compromised in the early months of 2006 as Iraq descended into nightmarish sectarian violence following the February bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra. It was against this backdrop that the President advanced his immigration-reform bill. It was not well-drafted and deserved to be defeated. Even so, however, Bush had been championing most of its provisions since his days as governor of Texas, and his advocacy had not prevented a single conservative activist from supporting him wholeheartedly in 2000 or in 2004.

Had he come before the American people as the victor in Iraq, Bush would have had his immigration bill for the taking—with, to be sure, muted grumbling from some of his backers analogous to the grumbling after the passage of his education legislation in 2001 or the prescription-drug entitlement in 2003. In 2006, however, he found himself on the receiving end of wildly intemperate blasts of scorn, contempt, rage, and disgust, and his own party killed the bill.

By November, going into the election, the GOP was divided, weakened, and disheartened. Had the Iraq war gone differently, none of this would have been the case.

ONE WAY of seeing how failure to win in Iraq—not the fact of the war itself—was the primary cause of the political change in 2006 is by observing the behavior of the victorious Democrats. Immediately upon assuming power, their leaders in the House and Senate began advancing legislative proposals to compel some kind of pullback of American forces. In the House of Representatives, the one-time hawk John Murtha championed a measure putting partial controls on further deployments. But this, according to the *Washington Post*, frightened freshman Democrats from districts where Bush had carried the day in 2004. And so, under the disappointed direction of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the Murtha controls devolved into recommendations and then vanished altogether.

In March 2007, the Democratic-led Senate voted 50-48 to attach a requirement to an Iraq funding bill mandating an American withdrawal from Iraq by the end of March 2008—and then, two months later, it removed that mandate from the final piece of legislation. Something similar

happened with a House proposal to compel a withdrawal by the end of August 2008. And on it went for the balance of 2007, as Democrats failed again and again to limit the American mission in Iraq.

What had happened? If the results of the 2006 election had indeed been a straightforward mandate for the Democratic view that “this war is lost” (as Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid would put it in April 2007), legislation sent from Capitol Hill to the White House would have reflected that conviction. Democrats from Bush districts would not have objected, and fearful Republicans would have crossed party lines to side with their Democratic colleagues. That is what occurs when an issue has a mandate.

Yet Democrats could not get a single withdrawal proposal through the legislative process to the President’s desk. What is more, their efforts to do so have endeared them to no one: neither disaffected independents, nor depressed Republicans, nor liberals crying for Bush’s head. To the contrary: according to polls, the present Democratic leadership in Congress is the object of an icy public scorn several degrees cooler even than the permafrost in which George W. Bush has been embalmed.

So Republicans are not the only political actors who have ventured onto the 2008 stage in a state of confusion, unsure of their lines. Democrats, whom one might have expected to be exhilarated by the disfavor into which their rivals have fallen, are suffering from a bit of vertigo themselves, unsettled by the discovery that antipathy toward the Republicans has not spared them, either. When it comes to Iraq, they, too, appear to be at cross-purposes with a substantial body of American public opinion.

Clearly, something happened between the time the Democrats won in 2006 and the time they took over at the beginning of 2007 to account for this disarray. That something was the President’s decision to change strategy. Although he explained the Iraq “surge” in relatively modest terms—as a means of imposing security in Baghdad in order to give the nascent political system a chance to work—this was the first actual “strategy for victory” he had ever put before the American people. It was based on the notion that there was an identifiable, organized enemy fighting on two fronts with a strategy of its own, and that this enemy could be confronted and defeated through American military action.

Absent the surge strategy and the new way forward that it offered, Democrats would probably have prevailed on their declared intention to force a pullback from Iraq in 2007. There was no way

Republicans could or would have stood their ground beside their President if he had simply persisted in carrying on as if no change of strategy were necessary. It was either pull back or move forward. Bush chose the latter—to the consternation of Democrats and, be it noted, also over the objections of many of his own closest advisers. As Fred Barnes has written in the *Weekly Standard*:

Inside his own administration, Bush had few allies on a surge in Iraq aside from the Vice President and a coterie of National Security Council staffers. The Joint Chiefs were disinclined to send more troops to Iraq or adopt a new strategy. So were General George Casey, the American commander in Iraq, and Centcom commander John Abizaid. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice favored a troop pull-back.

BUSH WOULD describe the repudiation of the Republicans in the 2006 midterm election as a “thumpin’.” To the extent that it motivated him to act, the thumpin’ was an invaluable, if painful, message from his own constituents, delivered the only way they could to a President in the middle of his second term. Democrats read into it what they wished to, and got it wrong. But no less wrong were those Republicans and conservatives who placed the blame for the thumpin’ on the wasteful conduct of Congress and the passage of domestic legislation they did not like. Even John McCain, whose presidential candidacy was rescued from oblivion by the success of the surge, has continued to miss this point. “Republicans lost the 2006 election not over the war in Iraq,” he repeated in a January debate in California, “but over spending. Our base became disheartened.”

It is a great irony that the best political news for Republicans in a notably unfavorable election year—with the public telling pollsters that it is desirous of change and prefers Democratic stands on most issues by margins ranging from ten to twenty points—may come out of Iraq. Should the surge’s progress continue and deepen, the Democratic nominee may find himself or herself in a very uncomfortable position come autumn. The Democratic base will not have changed its mind about the war’s evil, and it will not be happy with a leader who does. So the nominee will find it almost impossible to embrace the surge, and certainly not after having disparaged it caustically in the past. But if the nominee does not embrace the real possibility of victory in Iraq, he or she will run the risk of appearing defeatist, or worse, in the eyes of the

same independent voters who fled the GOP in droves in 2006.

Meanwhile, the candidate most associated with the surge, John McCain, will (assuming he becomes the nominee of the Republican party) be uniquely well situated to deploy an accusation he has been leveling at the Democratic frontrunners for nearly a year. “I was very disappointed to see Senator Obama and Senator Clinton embrace the policy of surrender by voting against funds to support our brave men and women fighting in Iraq,” McCain said about a vote the two Democrats cast in May 2007. He called this “the equivalent of waving a white flag of surrender to al Qaeda.”

As his campaign took off in January 2008, McCain sharpened the dagger:

Candidate Clinton has called for surrender and waving the white flag. I think it’s terrible. I think it’s terrible. . . . For us to do what Senator Clinton wants us to do—that is to wave the white flag—I cannot guarantee United States security in the region or in the United States.

This is the ground—as tribunes of an American victory in Iraq—on which Republicans will have no choice but to stand in November 2008. They may not be able to prevail with it, but they have no hope of prevailing without it.

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